

# Alternatives-to-Suspension Grant Project-Year 1 Case Study Report



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## Part 1 Overview: The Alternatives-to-Suspension Grant

The Minnesota Department of Education awarded grant funds to build the capacity of schools to develop alternatives-to-suspension programs and implement scientifically research-based interventions that reduce the need for suspension as a response to disciplinary incidents.

Each grant focuses on goals that impact systems change in the areas of:

- **Planning:** A leadership team will develop a structured service delivery system using evidence-based practices that include a multi-level approach with clear guidelines that uses data-based decision-making for determining disciplinary action.
- **Administration:** The leadership team will identify changes in administrative policies needed to support and sustain the alternatives-to-suspension program.
- **Program Development:** The leadership team will develop a plan for ongoing formative evaluation to assess the fidelity of implementation of the alternatives-to-suspension program defined in the program plan.
- **Evaluation:** Students that have participated in the alternatives-to-suspension program will:
  - Have a reduced number of out-of-school suspensions.
  - Have a higher grade point average (GPA).
  - Improve average daily attendance by 10 percent over last year.
  - Improve social/emotional functioning.

### Who are the grantees?

- Burnsville Independent School District (ISD) # 191 - Eagle Ridge Junior High
- Columbia Heights Public Schools ISD # 13 - Central Middle School
- Intermediate District # 287 and North East Metro # 916 - Alternative Learning Centers
- Proctor Public School ISD # 704 - Proctor High School
- South Washington County Schools ISD # 833 - Park High School

### Why are the Alternatives-to-Suspension Grants needed?

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) issued a report to the Legislature, *Dangerous Weapons and Disciplinary Incidents School Year 2008-09*, which found that 87 percent of all disciplinary actions taken in schools were out-of-school suspensions. The report found that:

- The most common incident types are disruptive, disorderly conduct or insubordination and fighting, followed by assault, threats/intimidation and verbal abuse.
- The majority of all reported incidents occur during school hours.
- Most incidents occur in the classroom or other indoor area, followed by the hallway.
- Male offenders commit just over 75 percent of incidents.
- The majority of offenders are White, Non-Hispanic or Black, Non-Hispanic.
- Most offenders are clustered in 8<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> grades.
- With very few exceptions, most incidents are committed by youth who are students enrolled at the school of the incident.
- Students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) commit approximately 46 percent of the disciplinary incidents.

The disability status of the offender is recorded for each disciplinary incident. Of the students identified as having a disability, 50 percent are identified as emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD), 23 percent specific learning disability (SLD) and 15 percent other health disabilities (OHD).

### **What does the research say about the effectiveness of suspension?**

The effectiveness of suspension is measured by whether the use of suspension as a consequence decreases undesirable behavior and reduces the probability of the student engaging in an undesirable behavior again. As reported in the 2008-2009 DIRS dataset, 32,045 students were suspended for 60,398 incidents. This result implies that a significant number of students were involved in more than one disciplinary incident per year.

Research tells us that time spent learning is the single best predictor of positive academic outcomes (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Exclusion from class due to disciplinary action leads to lost instructional time and increased academic difficulties. In Minnesota during the 2008-2009 school year, a total of 96,948 days or partial days were missed because of school suspensions and the average length of suspension was 2.58 days. Suspension from school keeps students away from the learning environment but offers no corrective action. Suspending students who engage in problem behaviors does not identify or address the students' underlying problems; instead, it prevents the student from obtaining school support services (Townsend, 2000).

Researchers suggest that students who are suspended often lose their self-esteem, feel powerless and helpless, develop resentment for school administration and/or feel stigmatized by teachers, administrators, and parents (DeRidder, 1991). Students who feel disengaged from the school are at higher risk of dropping out or failing to complete their educational program (Alexander et al., 1997; Finn & Cox, 1992, Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

### **What are the indicators of effectiveness?**

The Alternatives-to-Suspension grants were awarded to assist local school districts in making system-wide changes at the district, program and practice levels in their response to discipline incidents. Research in this area indicates that effective interventions include:

- A school-wide positive behavior program that focuses on prevention and positive school climate.
- Positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior and social skills training.
- A decision-making framework for discipline that includes a variety of discipline alternatives.
- Active involvement of parents and related professionals.
- Staff training, especially in the area of classroom management.
- Positive teacher-student interactions.
- Engaging instruction.

Annual performance indicators for each of the participating grantees include:

- Development of a functioning alternatives-to-suspension program.
- Changes in administrative policies that support and sustain alternatives-to-suspension.
- Ongoing evaluation to assess fidelity of implementation.
- An overall reduction of out-of-school suspensions.

## Part 2 Description of Grant Projects Selected

### ISD # 191 Burnsville – Eagan – Savage Eagle Ridge Junior High School

#### Planning

The multidisciplinary Alternative Suspension Program and Intervention Responsive Education (ASPIRE) team surveyed staff and students about school climate and discipline, then used the results to develop the school-wide discipline program called “SOAR”. The SOAR program outlines clear and consistent school-wide behavior expectations and focuses on increasing parent involvement, developing alternatives-to-suspension placement options, providing staff development on classroom management practices and creating a positive school climate.

#### Administration/Policy

To create clear, consistent behavior expectations, the ASPIRE team created a SOAR credo. The team defined behaviors in an Above the Line/Below the Line Triangle, posted in each classroom, and created a new office referral form and a discipline flow chart detailing a predictable process for responding to discipline incidents in the school. During the first two weeks of school, staff and students were trained on the SOAR credo, behavior definitions, the discipline process and the alternatives-to-suspension program. Parents received a newsletter with information about the program.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SOAR CREDO</b></p> <p>Safe environment Own your actions Appropriate behavior <u>Respect/responsibility</u></p>
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#### Program Development

Staff was trained in classroom management, positive behavior interventions and creating a positive school climate with an emphasis on reinforcing positive behaviors. Staff distributed SOAR tickets to students in recognition of positive behavior. The tickets are entered in drawings for prizes. The ASPIRE team uses newsletters, positive phone calls, and parent surveys to communicate with families.

The SOAR program features a continuum of alternatives-to-suspension practices. Students removed from their regular classroom go to the alternative learning room (ALR). There, students work with a trained staff member in owning their actions and identifying alternate behavior choices. ALR staff is trained to interact with students in the crisis cycle and to conduct problem-solving conferences. The associate principal tailors the student’s consequence to his or her offense. Consequences include time in the ALR room, apology notes, behavior packets, calls home, detention, community service, evening classes and/or Saturday school.

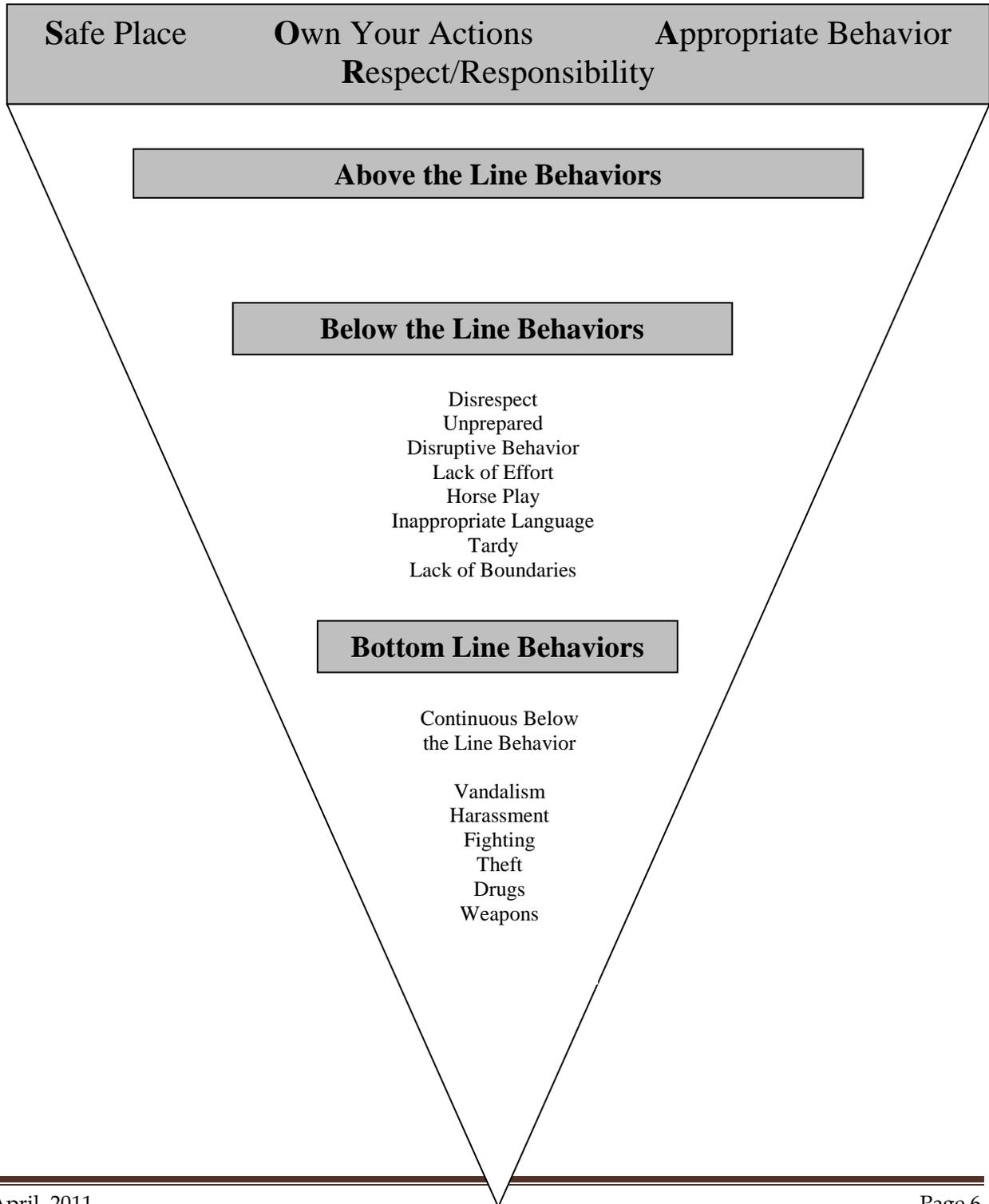
#### Evaluation

The ASPIRE team held weekly team meetings to review, discuss, and make suggestions for improvement to the SOAR program. The team administered a follow-up staff and student survey and reviews discipline data to evaluate the SOAR program’s effectiveness and make modifications as necessary.

#### Results

Eagle Ridge Junior High experienced a significant decrease in office referrals and suspensions following the implementation of the SOAR program. In June, Eagle Ridge Junior High reported significant decreases in office referrals (55 percent) and suspensions (78 percent) from the previous year. Approximately 22 students have attended evening classes and 75 have attended Saturday school. Of the students who attended the alternative placement, 30 percent were repeat offenders.

**Eagle Ridge Junior High  
Above the Line Plan**



## **ISD # 13 Columbia Heights Central Middle School**

### **Planning**

Central Middle School (CMS) in Columbia Heights implemented a tiered intervention model that reduced overall behavioral referrals significantly and also reduced school suspensions for students with the greatest needs while they were in an alternatives-to-suspension classroom. The school uses a School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS) framework.

### **Administration**

Two teams oversaw the project: an administration team and a building-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) leadership team. Through staff development on PBIS, the administration and PBIS teams developed the framework for implementation. The administration team also spent time in classrooms, hallways and lunchrooms observing staff and students. The teams completed additional teacher observation to promote staff development and ensure staff retention and implemented stronger and more thorough procedures to ensure consistent data collection and common understanding of appropriate referrals.

### **Program Development**

CMS joined the Minnesota Department of Education's 2009-10 SW-PBIS cohort and has since received staff development and tiered interventions services and supports. The school implemented Developmental Designs for students in tier I; restorative justice and Check and Connect interventions for tier II; and for tier III developed a alternatives-to-suspension classroom named Choices for at-risk students in need of intensive intervention. The philosophy guiding the Choices program is that discipline incidents are opportunities for teaching. In the Choices classroom, a licensed special education teacher and regular education teacher work with students in a restorative justice model to hold them accountable for their actions while encouraging them to be involved in the culture of the school. The Choices teachers also develop curriculum, use research-based social skills curriculum, conduct academic remediation for students and develop restitution activities in the form of service learning opportunities. Building staff have received training in PBIS, Check and Connect, restorative justice, behavior management and service learning opportunities.

### **Evaluation**

Staff used the Technology Information Education Services (TIES) and School-Wide Information System (SWIS) to collect and analyze behavioral data. The team also used the Attitude and Behavior assessment tool to collect data on risk behaviors, high-risk behavior patterns and measures of 40 developmental assets and 8 thriving measures. They recorded the number of times administration called parents and the number of parents who received letters concerning safety at CMS. Finally, the administration is continuing to monitor the number of staff resignations.

### **Results**

By January, Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) had been reduced by half compared to the previous year. By the end of the school year, there had been 1,457 ODRs at CMS, a significant drop from last year's total of 2,201.

The Choices Program has had an impact on reducing suspensions at CMS. Before entering the program, the 25 students accounted for a total of 105 ODRs and 45 suspension events that resulted in 62 days of suspension (41 days of out-of-school suspension, 21 days of in-school suspension). While in the Choices Program, ODRs for these 25 students dropped to 8 ODRs and 7 suspension events resulting in 11.5 days of out-of-school suspension and no in-school suspensions. However, after students left the Choices program and returned to general education classes, their ODRs and suspensions increased. This outcome is of great concern to the planning team and indicates a need for the Choices program to provide intensive services for a longer period of time in order to assist students in developing self-management skills.

Overall, these decreases have allowed administration more time to communicate with parents, monitor hallways and lunchrooms, collaborate with staff regarding behavioral issues, analyze behavioral data, develop academic interventions, and review and plan for the project. The decrease in behavior referrals has also allowed the PBIS coach to do additional training for individual teachers in the classroom, conduct restorative justice circles and provide mediation for students.

## **Intermediate Districts # 916 and # 287 Alternative Learning Programs**

### **Planning**

Intermediate school districts 916 and 287 Alternative Learning Center (ALC) sites have collaborated to decrease out-of-school suspensions by implementing the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) model created by Dr. Ross Greene. The model is based on two beliefs: 1) that students will do well if they can; and, 2) that discipline incidents are teachable opportunities. The model identifies five categories of thinking skills that are critical for good behavior: executive functioning skills, language processing skills, emotion regulation skills, cognitive flexibility skills and social skills (Greene, 2009). Problem behavior is viewed as a result of a skill deficit in one or more of these areas.

### **Administration/Policy**

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were created to provide training and mentoring opportunities. All PLCs attended an advanced CPS training, read “Lost at School” by Dr. Ross Greene, and participated in small group discussions.

### **Program Development**

Staff provides a continuum of support to students. Staff has “Plan B” discussions with students to uncover the underlying causes of his or her maladaptive behavior and to develop the skills and strategies to prevent similar behavior from reoccurring. For students with more intensive needs, staff has “Emergency Plan B” discussions to create plans to defuse and de-escalate a crisis.

### **Evaluation**

A data collection system was implemented for documenting suspensions, Proactive Plan B conversations and staff-led collaborative problem solving sessions. Staff will evaluate the effectiveness of the CPS model and related programs by examining pre- and post-surveys, post-workshop evaluations, attendance, graduation rates, achievement data and suspension data from August 2009 to September 2010.

### **Results**

Preliminary suspension data indicates a 39 percent reduction in the number of out-of-school suspensions at East View and Metro Heights Academy. Furthermore, all of the suspensions have been for major incidents such as fighting, weapon possession, drug possession, attempted robbery and threats. Suspensions in the categories of insubordination and disruptive behavior have been virtually eliminated at both sites.

In a fall survey, 82 percent of licensed staff agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement, “I believe the Collaborative Problem Solving Model provides a positive framework for helping students that exhibit challenging behavior.”

## **ISD # 704 Proctor High School**

### **Planning**

Proctor High School trained 30 of 67 staff members in Restorative Measures (RM) to implement alternatives-to-suspension. This training was highly congruent with the district's commitment to embedding the social-emotional learning competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Participating staff then guided the alternatives-to-suspension process where students who would have been suspended instead developed and followed through with a restorative plan they selected from a menu of restorative measures.

### **Administration/Policy**

Proctor High School administrators and the district superintendent supported Restorative Action Planning and development throughout the school year. An analysis of first-year data will take place over the summer to determine the program's strengths and challenges. Based on these findings, a recommendation to embed Restorative Measures in suspension policy will be brought to the school board early this fall.

### **Program Development**

Staff used the Restorative Circle process, Developmental Designs by Origins, the Menu of Restorative Measures (RM) and some of the Navigation 101 curriculum with the five social-emotional competencies as a focus to maintain a positive classroom and school environment. Next year staff will integrate related RM developmental guidance activities into homeroom twice weekly.

### **Evaluation**

Staff currently tracks students' academic performance, behavior and attendance to assess the program's effectiveness. Preliminary results indicate improvement in these areas for youth involved in RM. Designs by Origins provided on-site evaluation of RM efforts which indicated the beginnings of a systems change in our school. The representation of students with special needs in the suspended population continues to be a concern. While the actual number of students suspended this year dropped in both special education and regular education populations (from 14 to 13 for special education and from 27 to 5 for regular education), the representation of students with special needs within the total number of suspended increased from 34 percent (14 of 41 students) last year to 72 percent (13 out of 18) this year. The school psychologist indicated that the increase in the school's overall special education population from 11 to 13 percent (66 to 76 students) and the fact that the majority of newly identified students with special needs fall into the emotional-behavior disorder category—a group most likely to be predisposed to behavior issues—partially explains this increase. Earlier intervention and prevention with this group might help avoid this situation.

### **Results**

- A gain of 76 instructional days due to a 43 percent reduction in the number of suspension days (from 135 to 59).
- A 43 percent reduction in the number of students suspended (from 41 to 18).
- A reduction of approximately 30 to 40 percent in the recidivism rate for behaviors that resulted in suspensions. Re-offenses were less severe in magnitude.

## **ISD # 833 South Washington County Schools Park High School**

### **Planning**

Park High School's (PHS) Successful Alternative Support (SAS) project draws on community and instructional resources to support changes in the school-wide disciplinary system and reduce recidivism rates and loss of instructional days. During the 2008-2009 school year, 75 percent of out-of-school suspensions were related to disruptive behavior in unstructured settings.

Classrooms with unclear behavior management strategies and inconsistent expectations had higher behavior referrals to the administrative offices.

### **Administration/Policy**

During the 2009-2010 school year, South Washington County opened a third high school and adopted a middle school model, adding ninth-grade students to PHS for the first time. To assure success with the alternatives-to-suspension program, PHS implemented school-wide disciplinary practices to:

1. Build a school-wide climate supportive of positive behavior.
2. Facilitate positive interactions.
3. Deliver appropriate instruction.
4. Provide ongoing close supervision.

If student misbehavior results in an office referral, building administrators have the option to refer a student to the SAS Project alternative.

### **Program Development**

Developing successful county, parent and other community partnerships plays a key role in the success of SAS. The grant provides funding for the project managers, teachers and staff to build on current programming and develop new programming to meet student and family needs. The SAS program features:

1. Peer Counsel for Offense Resolution (PEER C. O. R.), a restorative process to resolve juvenile offenses by promoting involvement of the offender, community members, parents/guardians, the victim and members of the offender's peer group; and,
2. Social Skills Training/Aggression Replacement Training (START) program to teach students to rethink the way they act in conflict situations and learn communication and problem solving skills.

### **Evaluation**

The SAS implementation team reviews monthly reports on student outcomes and program effectiveness.

### **Results**

SAS data indicates that activities designed to reduce recidivism rates and the loss of instructional days contributed to improvement for the students who have received intervention. At the end of the school year 23 students had participated in the START program and 13 graduated from the program. Nineteen students were referred to the PEER C.O.R. program.

Repeated office referrals for students participating in the START program have decreased 49 percent. In every case but three, office referrals were decreased by over half. Out-of-school

suspensions for the students referred to the Peer C.O.R. were reduced by 69 percent amounting to 50 more days of students being in school.

### **Part 3 Challenges to Implementation Survey Results**

Four of five participating districts completed surveys about the challenges to implementation of Alternatives-to-Suspension grant programs in spring of 2010. District staff rated the following items on a seven-point scale, with one representing “strongly disagree” and seven representing “strongly agree.”

#### **Program Development**

<b>We had difficulty with:</b>	<b>Average</b>
Deciding where to start planning.	2.38
Finding resources on suspension alternatives.	3.25
Finding evidence-based alternatives.	3.25
Choosing alternatives that fit best with school.	2.88
<b>Focusing or narrowing our program plans.</b>	<b>4.25</b>
Knowing how to implement the program.	3.5

Districts reported moderate difficulty with program development. The greatest difficulty was in focusing the program plans. Most districts reported that more planning time would have been beneficial, in part to do more research into alternatives-to-suspension. Several districts emphasized that if they were able to do it again, they would make sure planning is complete before the school year begins so that policy and programs were in place before students arrive.

One district faced significant challenges in obtaining staff buy-in. They reported that they would have delayed implementation until that achieved adequate buy-in, typically support from 80 percent or more of all stakeholders. Another district reported that administrative and staff position changes created discontinuity in the grant writing, program planning and implementation stages. This district recommended having all stakeholders involved in the entire process from the very beginning. One district reported that they needed to narrow their focus because they had too many initiatives going on. Finally, one district suggested adding a community-building component to the grant and requiring districts to work more proactively with students while planning their program.

Districts reported that they would benefit from more training in the areas of motivating learners, best practices in the area of classroom behavior management and evidence-based alternatives-to-suspension practices.

#### **Buy-in and Support**

<b>We have experienced inadequate buy-in or support from:</b>	<b>Average</b>
Administration	2.25
<b>Teachers</b>	<b>3.25</b>
Support staff	2.63
Students	2.63
Parents/families	2.5
Community members	2.5

Although this area ranked lower as a barrier for the entire group of districts, one site reported that buy-in was the most significant barrier to their implementation. Teachers were reportedly the most difficult group of stakeholders from which to secure buy-in. Again, districts reported that they would have spent more time securing buy-in before implementing the program.

Specifically, districts recommended spending more time up front explaining to stakeholders what the new program entails, why it is being implemented, and providing evidence of how it will benefit students, staff, parents and the community. Districts emphasized the importance of communicating clearly what each staff member's role is in the new program and providing ongoing in-services and reminders. Districts also recommended periodically sending out newsletters and information to the community.

Two districts suggested that a visit from an expert who could address why alternatives-to-suspension practices are important may increase buy-in. Districts also requested meetings with other participants to share resources and strategies. Another district requested MDE to continue doing what has been done and said that meeting in person with the grant manager was very beneficial. Finally, one district suggested that MDE send newsletters to superintendents and special education directors regarding the grant.

## Resources

<b>Inadequate resources that have been barriers to the program are:</b>	<b>Average</b>
Time for planning.	5
Administration time.	4.14
<b>Time for staff training.</b>	<b>5.43</b>
Time for student training.	4.38
Money.	3.88
Staff to implement program.	4.88

Resources were ranked high as a barrier to implementation. Time was reported as a bigger barrier than money. The most commonly reported resource that districts needed more of was time for staff training. One district reported that they would have benefited from money to cover program planning and another would have hired a trained staff for their Saturday school.

## Fidelity of Implementation

<b>We have had problems sticking to the original plan because:</b>	<b>Average</b>
The plan was not adequately clear or focused.	3.88
Some staff doesn't seem to understand the plan.	3.63
<b>The plan was not adequately communicated to all staff.</b>	<b>4.13</b>
The plan was not adequately communicated to all students.	4
The plan was not adequately communicated to all families.	3.88

Communication was the biggest barrier to proper implementation. Districts commented that they would have communicated with stakeholders (i.e., students, staff, parents, community) earlier and more often during program planning and implementation. One district reported that they would have held an open forum for all stakeholders and provided more time for staff development. Districts again stressed the importance of securing staff buy-in and support early. One district noted that regularly scheduled meetings had been helpful in implementing the

program. Finally, one district reported that they would have benefited from spending more time establishing community expectations of students.

### Summary

Moving forward, grantees should be permitted to spend more time in the planning phase of program development. Participating districts should be encouraged to secure at least 80 percent buy-in from staff before moving forward with implementation. On-going communication emerged as a critical factor in program success. Districts should be required to report how they plan on collaborating and communicating with stakeholders throughout planning and implementation. Districts suggested that MDE facilitate sharing resources such as speakers and training among grantees. Finally, districts would benefit from continued training in and support with evidence-based alternatives-to-suspension and time to meet with other participating districts to share ideas and resources.

## Part 4 Conclusion

The Alternatives-to-Suspension grants have been awarded for Year 2. All of the grantees have sustained and improved their alternatives-to-suspension projects based on the results of the first year of implementation. In Year 2 of the grant, grant staff are meeting on a quarterly basis and working with grant management staff to learn about sustainable implementation strategies, common principles of effective practice and the development of a systematic data collection protocol.

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