

Alternatives-to-Suspension Grant: Progress Report - Year 2



Minnesota Department of
Education

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Minnesota Department of Education

Alternatives-to-Suspension Grant: Progress Report Year 2

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- Time spent learning is the single best predictor of positive academic outcomes (Skiba and Sprague, 2008).
- There are no data showing that out-of-school suspension or expulsion reduce rates of disruption or improve school climate; indeed, the available data suggest that, if anything, disciplinary removal appears to have negative effects on student outcomes and the learning climate (American Psychological Association, 2008).
- Youth who are suspended or expelled are at a greater risk for academic failure, school drop-out, and incarceration (Sundius and Farneth, 2008).
- Exclusionary discipline measures are inequitably used. Students who are male, who are African-American, or who have disabilities are suspended at a much higher rate than are other students (Sundius and Farneth, 2008).

Evidence from many studies suggests that out-of-school suspension is not effective in deterring behavior problems, and instead, is linked to harmful effects on schools and youth. 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). Suspension decreases access to instruction and increases academic difficulties. Proponents of out-of-school suspensions believe that suspending a student from school will deter future behavior problems. Research evidence contradicts these beliefs.

Researchers suggest that students who are suspended often experience a loss of 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 and Cox, 1992, Reschly and Christenson, 2006).

In 2009-10, 84 percent of all disciplinary actions taken by school administrators in Minnesota public schools were out-of-school suspension, resulting in 52,652 suspensions and 110,033 missed instructional days. The majority of suspensions are for behaviors that do not endanger others. The top suspension incident type for the 2009-2010 school year was disruptive/disorderly conduct/insubordination. Over 2,500 suspensions were for attendance issues, which only exacerbate the problem of absenteeism.

In 2009-2010, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) awarded grant funds to five school districts to develop alternatives-to-suspension programs and implement interventions that reduce the need for suspension as a response to disciplinary incidents. All of the original grantees continued during year two of the grant focusing their efforts on sustainable implementation strategies, common principles of effective practice and the development of a systematic data collection protocol.

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Burnsville-Savage-Eagan School District – Eagle Ridge Junior High School

Eagle Ridge Junior High School has reduced the number of out-of-school suspensions by 78 percent as a result of the alternatives-to-suspension grant project. Office discipline referrals have decreased by 55 percent. One hundred thirty-seven students have participated in evening classes or Saturday school as an alternative to an out-of-school suspension. Culturally diverse after-school activities and neighborhood forums designed to increase school connectedness and positive parent engagement were attended by 63 parents and 85 students.

	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
Office Discipline Referrals	1498	678	777
Out of School Suspensions	283	62	130
Evening classes (number of students)		22	4
Saturday school (number of students)		75	36

Although the overall number of suspensions declined significantly the numbers continued to be disproportionate for minority students and students who receive special education services. In the school year prior to the implementation of the alternatives-to-suspension program 77 percent of the suspensions were students of color. During the 2009-2010 school year 62 percent of out-of-school suspensions were students of color, whereas 38 percent were white students. During the 2010-2011 school year the percentage of students of color being suspended decreased by 13 percent to 49 percent. The 28 percent decrease in percentage of students of color suspended in a three-year time period indicates that the alternatives-to-suspension program is having an impact. In 2010-2011 school year, building out-of-school suspension data indicated that 69 percent of the students suspended were students receiving special education services.

Current research also indicates effective discipline includes Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), parent involvement, and providing an educational component directly related to conflict resolution and mediation, as well as restorative practices. (Sullivan, 2008) The third year of the Alternatives-to-Suspension grant will include staff development on culturally responsive instruction, continue the alternative placements such as evening classes and Saturday school, improve school climate and parent involvement, and increase student connectedness and engagement. With increased understanding of diverse populations by staff, students increased time in school and increased feelings of connectedness we will increase student achievement and overall success.

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Columbia Heights Public Schools – Columbia Academy (Central Middle School)

Columbia Academy's second year of the Alternatives-to-Suspension grant project focused on developing targeted and intensive interventions and supports for student's identified as at-risk for suspension based on building discipline data. Using grant funds, training on Developmental Designs, Check & Connect, Peer Mediation, Restorative Justice and Second Step was provided.

Building discipline data results indicate that out-of-school suspensions decreased from 341 in 2010 to 278 in 2011. The total number of days of out-of-school suspension also decreased 745 days in 2010 to 684 days in 2011. However, office discipline referrals during that same time increased from 1490 incident reports in 2010 to 2244 incident reports in 2011. On the whole, total number of out-of-school suspensions decreased last year but total number of behavioral referrals increased.

The building leadership team analyzed the building behavior data and found that the most common infractions resulting in office discipline referrals were for defiance/disrespect/non-compliance (40 percent), disruption (26 percent), physical contact (five percent), physical aggression (five percent) and abusive/inappropriate language (four percent).

Further, the team found that five percent of students accounted for 45 percent of all office referrals. Ten percent of students accounted for 66 percent of all office referrals and 20 percent of students accounted for 88 percent of all office referrals.

The team also reviewed the discipline data in terms of race/ethnicity and found every ethnic group except Black/African American has a lower percentage of total referrals relative to their percent of enrolled students (see table below). However, 76 percent of Black/African American students have at least one discipline referral.

ETHNIC GROUP	Percent of Enrollment	Percent of total referrals
American Indian/Native American	3.1 percent	0.6 percent
Asian	6.2 percent	1.8 percent
Black/African American	32.9 percent	64.1 percent
Hispanic/Latino	25.5 percent	18.8 percent
White	32.3 percent	12.7 percent

Given the significant over-representation of Black/African-American students in the building discipline data, Columbia Academy has developed a plan to work to develop cultural competence among staff, enhance the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework and increase efficacy of universal prevention strategies and targeted interventions.

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Intermediate School Districts 287 and 916 – Alternative Learning Centers

Intermediate District 287 and Northeast Metro 916 operate four Area Learning Centers (ALCs) for students in grades 9 -12, at risk of not graduating from high school. The primary focus of the Alternatives-to-Suspension grant project is decreasing out-of-school suspensions by implementing a Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) Model.

The very criteria that allow students to attend an ALC can be associated with common reasons for suspension. These criteria include difficulties with academics, mental health problems, physical or sexual abuse, homelessness and exclusion or expulsion from school. Students who meet these criteria often lack support systems and exhibit poor judgment, poor social perception, and aggressive behaviors that trigger inappropriate behaviors in school that result in out-of-school suspensions. Many have failed in their former high school programs, have a history of frequent out-of-school suspensions, and some have been expelled.

Suspension data for our ALCs revealed disturbing trends when we first started the CPS program. ALC students were suspended for offenses such as fighting, verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, disruptive or disorderly conduct and insubordination. Suspensions in the categories of insubordination and disruptive behavior have been virtually eliminated at the ALC sites.

	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
Out-of-School Suspensions	39	36	15

The core belief of the CPS approach is that if a youth *could* do well they *would* do well. CPS teaches adults and youth that challenging behavior is a result of lagging skills and unsolved problems and that challenging behavior occur *when the demands of the environment exceed a person's capacity to respond adaptively*. In the CPS approach there are three ways to try to solve problems: Plan A - unilateral problem solving), Plan B - identifying the unsolved problems that are precipitating the challenging episodes by expressing empathy and drilling down for information to develop an understanding the person's concern or perspective and by selecting high-priority issues to address together, and Plan C - dropping the problem completely. With CPS, the focus is on the things that a person can actually do something about, things that can actually be worked on.

The Intermediate districts continue implementing the CPS program and support the capacity of all staff to address the most challenging behaviors and student skill deficiencies through curricular activities. The goal is to further reduce out-of-school suspensions for even the most egregious behaviors.

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Proctor Public Schools – Proctor Secondary Schools

Proctor Secondary School (PSS) educates 607 9th-12th grade students in northeastern Minnesota. School records show that prior to 2009, the number of Proctor secondary students who had been suspended was higher than the state average and overrepresented students receiving special education services. Since the award of Alternatives-to-Suspension grant and development of the Respect and Peace in Schools (RAPs) out-of-school suspensions have decreased from 41 to 16, and there has been a reduction in the number of students with special needs suspended. Nine students with special needs were suspended in 2010-11; 13 in 2009-10, and 14 students with special needs were suspended in 2008-09 a decrease of 36 percent.

	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
Out of School Suspensions	41	18	16
RAPS (number of students)		41	42
Number of days out of school	135	59	44
Average Number of Days Suspended	3.30	3.27	2.75

PSS tracked the academic performance and behavior indicators for the students involved in the RAPS program and for whom longitudinal data was available:

- 50 percent of the students improved their GPA
- 90 percent of the students decreased behavior incidents
- 80 percent of the students demonstrated improved mental health functioning
- 60 percent of the students decreased involvement in conflicts
- 90 percent of the students increased connection to community
- 0 percent of the students re-offended

PSS has implemented a set of restorative practices, engaged in professional learning community activities and engaged students in the development of restorative action planning choices. The school administration is working with the district school board to adopt restorative practices as formal district policy and as an annual focus of district in-service training.

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South Washington Public Schools – Park High School

The **Successful Alternative Supports (SAS)** grant project at Park High School (PHS) has demonstrated positive outcomes after the first two years of implementation. There is strong support by high school staff to develop a school culture of achievement and accomplishment by continuing to implement the alternative-to-suspension program options and incorporate school-wide supports to develop a healthy school climate for all students. PHS has included a goal in the school improvement plan (SIP) goal to reduce out-of-school suspensions and improve school climate.

Poor academic performance coupled with concerns about reoccurring problematic student behaviors causing students to miss academic learning time was a concern for the PHS staff. In two years, PHS has met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for all subgroups on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment II (MCAII), closed the gender gap in reading and increased math scores. PHS has the highest percentage of students passing the GRAD writing exam among the three district high schools.

Behavioral data was compared between 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11: suspensions for disruptive behavior, fighting, harassment, assault decreased from 55 percent to 54 percent to 29 percent respectively; alcohol, tobacco and drugs decreased from 25 percent to 22 percent to 16 percent respectively; and miscellaneous offenses increased from 20 percent to 24 percent to 55 percent respectively. The number of office referrals decreased substantially last year, from 294 referrals in 2009-10 to 161 in 2010-2011. The average number of days a student was suspended out-of-school per incident has consistently decreased from 3.9 to 2.06 to 1.4 days.

The research-based interventions that have been implemented as alternatives-to-suspension include: 1) a restorative justice process known as Peer C.O.R. and 2) The Social Skills and Aggression Replacement Training (START) program to help students re-think their actions in conflict situations. In 2010-2011, the SAS program adopted a ninth grade guidance program; Career Choices. The team, and school staff, believe that when students are engaged in their learning, recognize the value of their education, and start high school with the end in mind; they are much less likely to engage in inappropriate behaviors in school.

PHS staff report that the interventions, training and tools made available through the grant have made a positive difference in meeting the educational needs of at-risk students. However, the number of behavioral referrals still remains high, specifically within the “Other” category. The SAS team believes that if we can increase the positive culture of the school, continue implementing suspension alternatives, and target ninth grade students; we will be able to keep at-risk students in school and provide more productive teaching opportunities leading to student success.

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Conclusion

The Alternatives-to-Suspension grants have been continued for a final year. As evidenced by this report, the grantees have sustained and improved their alternatives-to-suspension projects and have gained valuable knowledge about the implementation and the impact of the alternatives-to-suspension program in their schools. Grantees have developed strategies to use data to inform their program design and monitor effectiveness. In Year Three of the grant, the focus has shifted to embedding the alternatives-to-suspension practices into school policy and daily interaction between staff and student and families.

Resources from the Minnesota Department of Education

Alternatives-to-Suspension Fact Sheet: Outcomes of Out-of-School Suspension

Evidence from many studies suggests that out-of-school suspension is not effective in deterring behavior problems, and instead, is linked to harmful effects on schools and youth.

Alternatives-to-Suspension Fact Sheet: Effective Classroom Management Practices

Effective classroom management strategies help to prevent student misbehavior and missed instructional time due to disciplinary practices such as out-of-school suspensions and have an impact on instruction and student achievement.

Alternatives-to-Suspension Fact Sheet: Multi-Tiered Behavior Support Systems that Reduce Out-of-School Suspensions

To reduce the use of suspension, educators must develop evidence-based practices to actively teach and reinforce positive student behavior and to address the underlying reasons for misbehavior.

Fact sheets may be found on the MDE website at:

<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/SpecEdClass/index.html>

Dangerous Weapons and Disciplinary Incidents Report

Minnesota Statute Section 121A.06, Subdivision 3, requires the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to annually report on disciplinary incidents, and incidents involving dangerous weapons, that occur in Minnesota public schools. Data for this report were obtained from MDE's Disciplinary Incident Report System (DIRS).

<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Welcome/Legis/LegisRep/index.html>

SNAPSHOTS on Minnesota Youth

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and Department of Public Safety (DPS) have developed a series of reports about Minnesota's young people. Each *Snapshot* focuses on issues facing Minnesota youth. Website: <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp/statistical-analysis-center/Pages/snapshots-minnesota-youth.aspx>

School Climate

MDE provides information and technical assistance to school districts regarding school climate, classroom management, and youth development. Positive school climate intersects with attendance, transition and academic concerns as well as violence prevention, bullying prevention and school safety.

<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/SchSaf/SchClimate/index.html>

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Restorative Measures

MDE helps schools develop programming, curricula and intervention practices to create safe schools by teaching social skills, building positive school climate and repairing harm when it happens. Restorative measures are discipline interventions to hold student accountable for harm and address the needs of students or staff harmed and the needs of the school community.

<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/SafeSch/index..html>

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