

Effective In-School Suspension Programs

By

Mary Hrabak and Doris Settles

Introduction

In the 1970's, researchers began propagating the notion that out-of-school suspensions (OSS) were ineffective, and perhaps even detrimental to students. Administrators began developing and implementing in-school suspensions (ISS) as an alternative that would punish a misbehaving student—a distraction at best, a danger to others at worst—without requiring him or her to miss instructional days. The idea was that students would continue time-on-task in a more structured and supervised environment.

After over 20 years of reviewing this practice, educators are finding that, though they have the *potential* to effectively decrease misbehaviors, hit or miss results suggest that program design greatly impacts its effectiveness. A poorly designed ISS program will tend to have the same academic and social effect on a student as OSS would. Some characteristics of an ineffective program include: assignments don't come with the students, little or no time is spent on correcting the behavior that got the student sent to ISS, lack of follow-up tends to allow a student to fall back into old patterns. Consequently, misbehaviors persist, and quite often, students miss instruction just as if they had received an out-of-school suspension (Sanders, 2001).

Though there are different ISS models, the type most frequently cited as an effective strategy is not simply the punitive, “temporary controlling technique” that resembles solitary confinement. Rather, an effective program generally holds students accountable for school assignments AND involves some aspect of rehabilitation or functional behavior assessment/replacement (Morris & Howard, 2003). Such programs have been shown to reduce students' rule infringements as well as maintain the integrity of their education by ensuring that they don't evade schoolwork. As practiced at North Kirkwood Middle School's Student Advisory Center, Sanders provides some key elements to consider when implementing a successful in-school suspension program: selectivity, consistency, constructive supervision, student reflection on his/her behavior, behavior modification plans/implementation/follow-up, and parental involvement (2001).

Setting the Stage

The first step in an ISS referral is student misbehavior. Obviously, the first method of dealing with misbehavior should always be to keep the student in class, if possible, in order not to disrupt the educational process. Just as students should not be allowed to “escape” school via suspension, teachers should not use ISS as a way to escape dealing with a student, a point emphasized by Dante Tambellini (personal communication, April 3, 2002). This may require training teachers in effective de-escalation and behavior management methods. In other words, ISS should not be a first resort to a behavior problem or rule infringement.

No one can be expected to follow rules when they are not clearly laid out and consistently enforced. Furthermore, in order to make appropriate choices, one must be aware of the consequences for violating behavioral expectations. Sanders stresses the importance of a universally agreed-upon code of conduct that is taught to students and enforced across all classrooms and activities (2001). It should communicate to students clearly and specifically

which behaviors warrant an ISS referral, as well as what is expected of them during their suspension.

Interactive Supervision

One of the foremost reasons that schools switched from out-of-school suspensions to in-school suspensions is so that misbehaving students, a population who is often already struggling with schoolwork (Dilling, 1979), would not miss instructional days. ISS programs that most effectively reduce rule infractions also encourage poor students to work harder, as well as to learn problem solving and conflict resolution skills. There are several options for promoting such a productive, proactive environment in an ISS program.

- Limit the number of students in the room each day to a 15 student:1 teacher ratio or less, therefore allowing the staff to give students individual attention.
- Provide paraprofessionals to work with students as tutors as well as supervisors.
- Require referring teachers to send students to ISS with current assignments each day.
- Employ an ISS Coordinator to enforce the requirement that current assignments are provided each day of the suspension.
- Set aside time for individual counseling focused on behavior identification and replacement.
- Keep files for each student, tracking the behavior modification progress and following up with teachers to ensure that behavior is improving.

Behavior Counseling

Numerous studies have shown that, in order for a school to decrease its number of in-school suspensions, the ISS experience needs to be more constructive than punitive (Morris & Howard, 2003). The goal of education is to develop productive members of the community, and ISS should reflect that goal. The first step to this end is for the student to understand why he/she was suspended. What rule was broken? What attitude was being displayed? What actions were carried out?

One method of getting students to reflect upon their behavior and alternative choices uses worksheets to walk students through their choices and alternatives, a technique employed successfully by Susan Stephens (personal communication, April 23, 2002). These worksheets are designed for use by a counselor or school psychologist during individualized sessions (see Appendix A).

Many students that exhibit poor behavior are also not experiencing academic success, as Linda Nielsen notes (1979). Most are reading and writing far below grade level. For these students, a literacy-based approach has proven effective (Haley & Watson, 2000). Utilizing a writing workshop/portfolio approach (where the facilitator writes with the students), a series of prompts is used to create an essay about the event that led them to ISS. In hindsight, students see the pettiness or impulsivity of their actions, which results in better future choices. A questionnaire on writing process skills, four writing prompts, and a checklist of writing strategies is one method of implementing this process. The prompts and a “Strategies for Success” handout are provided at the end of this paper (Appendix B).

Consistency/Coordination

Just as a school-wide behavior management plan is fundamental to a well-run safe and healthy educational environment, coordinating school-wide understanding of the process and goals of an effective ISS program is also a priority. All school personnel, classified, certified, and administrative, should appreciate how ISS works and what outcomes are expected. In fact, Chicago public schools distribute a pamphlet detailing students' rights and the procedures involved in a suspension. Topics covered include reasons why a student may be suspended, what the school must do to carry out the suspension, what is expected of the student in this situation, and students' rights regarding school assignments and grades.

Sanders outlines a standardized process, which is the first step to providing training to school staff (2001). The following components should be uniformly practiced as part of a school's in-school suspension program:

- The referral process
- Student documentation of work
- Case files including follow-up reports
- Administrative reports

Parental Involvement

Most effective ISS models call for parental involvement on some level. Nielsen points out that parents can be a strong deterrent to student misbehavior (1979). Actions can range from notifying parents that a suspension has been incurred to accepting parental referrals of their children for participation in the program. Whatever degree meets your comfort level, parents need to be a part of the process (Dilling, 1979). There are several important reasons for involving parents.

- Parent disapproval of misbehavior supports your goals
- Identification of additional at-risk factors can occur
- Parents may become encouraging when they see positive steps taking place

Conclusion

Studying successful in-school suspension model demonstrates that simple punishment is not enough. Furthermore, if there is no academic or prosocial component, ISS has little or no advantage over OSS. An effective ISS program should be clear, consistent, selective, constructive, and involve parents.

References

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- Morris, R.C., & Howard, A.C. (2003). Designing an effective in-school suspension program, *The Clearing House*, 76, 156-159.
- Nielsen, L. (1979). Let's suspend suspensions: Consequences and Alternatives. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 57, 442-445.
- Sanders, D. (2001). A caring alternative to suspension. *Education Digest*, 66(7), 51-54.

Appendix A: Think Sheet

Student: _____

Date: _____

Staff: _____

1. **What behavior led to this consequence?**
2. **What were you thinking or feeling at the time?**
3. **What did you want to happen?**
4. **Did you get what you wanted?**
5. **What did it cost you?**
6. **What alternative(s) could you choose next time to avoid a consequence?**

Think Sheet

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Date: _____

Staff: _____

1. What behavior led to this consequence?

2. What were you thinking or feeling at the time?

3. What alternative(s) could you choose next time to avoid a consequence?

Think Sheet

Student: _____

Date: _____

Staff: _____



● What Happened?



What can I do next time?

Appendix B: Strategies for Success

Legend for chart:

A – Strategy

B - Rationale

A	B
Assess the academic level of students	To ensure that students experience success
Respect the development level of students	To focus students on what they are capable of accomplishing
Shift from the role of authoritarian to facilitator and co-learner	To provide support within the academic task
Focus on the students' strengths	To help students develop their potential
Lead students—do not tell them	To create leadership opportunities
Model behaviors that are required during teacher-student interactions	To clarify expectations of acceptable student behavior
Demonstrate appropriate behavior	To model behaviors that are required during teacher-student interactions
Share your own stories	To give students a sense of connection with <i>school</i> responsibilities
Establish support groups that foster collaboration	To provide a safe environment to share concerns
Praise students' ability to negotiate acceptable behavior	To enhance the students' self-esteem