Effective Discipline for Misbehavior: In School vs. Out of School Suspension

Neil Blomberg

Department of Education and Human Services
Villanova University

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Abstract

One of the greatest concerns of teachers, administrators, and parents is the issue of classroom management. Providing a safe, supportive, and focused classroom that allows students an opportunity to learn and grow is a top concern for everyone involved in the field of education. Although there are several different strategies for classroom management and discipline, the most severe problems and occurrences usually lead to either in school suspension (ISS) or out of school suspension (OSS). This paper examines the research findings on the application and effectiveness of both in and out of school suspension. Studies have shown that OSS is often misapplied, unfairly used against minorities, and ineffective at producing better future behavior (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams 1997; Verdugo 2002; Costenbader and Markson 1997). There is a special emphasis on ISS and its varying forms of application, and the research that suggests that not all ISS programs have the same form or produce the same deterrent effects among students (Leapley 1997; Opuni et al. 1990).

Introduction

Schools have many strategies and policies that are used for stopping and preventing student behavior problems. Suspension is one of these options. This literature review examines the consequences of both in-school suspension (ISS) and out of school suspension (OSS). It traces many of the problems that OSS presents, and also presents the more promising aspects of ISS. The report concludes with a research proposal that examines and tries to quantify the effectiveness of various models of ISS.

The operant definition for suspension, in this paper, can be defined as a "[d]isciplinary action that is administered as a consequence of a student's inappropriate behavior, requires that a student absent him/herself from the classroom or from the school for a specified period of time" (Morrison and Skiba,

2001 p. 174). Suspensions are used for a variety of reasons. In some cases they are administered because a student is severely disrupting the learning environment, and only the removal of the offending student can allow learning to continue. In other cases, threats to the physical safety of students, faculty, or school personnel lead to the disciplinary measure. Although the use of suspension is an accepted practice by both educators and researchers, its application is often problematic and controversial.

The operant definition in this paper for ISS is a discipline model where a student is removed from the classroom and compelled to stay in an ISS center for a variable length of time, ranging from part of a day to several days in a row. The ISS center is a specific staffed room where various behavior changing strategies, ranging from punitive to rehabilitative actions that attempt to stop or change student misbehavior without having the student removed from the school environment.

The operant definition for OSS in this paper is, "the removal of a student from the school environment for a period not to exceed ten days" (Mendez, Knoff & Ferron 2002 p.259). OSS succeeds in its short-term objective of removing a problematic student from school and stalls or, in many cases, prevents any future serious misbehavior. However, there are serious questions about the long-term goals for students and the effect of OSS on those goals. These problems with OSS are outlined in the research below.

Research Findings of OSS

An emerging trend in education is the fear that drugs, gangs, and violence are the behavior problems that are most serious in schools, and that school discipline should tackle these problems first. Horrific school shootings, the prevalence of drugs, and the threat of violence act as justification for tougher and more thorough classroom discipline. Research and surveys suggest, however, that the most often cited discipline problems have little to do with violence, but instead focus on insubordination and defiance of classroom instruction (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams 1997). A study of a large school district in Florida also found that insubordination and other nonviolent offenses compromised the majority of OSS (Mendez et al. 2002). Skiba, Peterson, and Williams, examined the disciplinary histories, office referrals, and punishment of two separate school district's middle school population. They found that the majority of offenses that led to office referrals were non-violent in nature. Out of 17,045 disciplinary incidents that led to an office referral during the 1994-1995 school year for the first school district studied, there were 5,673 OSS, the most prevalent disciplinary method used. Other research supports that OSS is the most frequently used discipline method for schools at the administrative level (Adams, 1992). Skiba's study also found that

there was rarely a strong correlation between the student misbehavior and an appropriately weighted punishment. In other words, variability among the teachers, staff, and student seemed to affect the severity of the punishment. This is a troubling finding, because it suggests a lack of uniformity about how severe punishments are applied.

Uniformity, however, can also have its problems. After the horrifying, high profile shootings at Columbine and other districts, many schools have adopted a draconian, zero tolerance policy toward certain types of student misbehavior. The adoption of zero tolerance policies has led to a storm of debate over the past decade. The term "zero tolerance" first arose as a reaction to drug crimes in the 1980's, and schools adopted the language for the educational setting. These policies often entail a suspension or expulsion for certain behaviors or practices, with no exceptions. Proponents of zero tolerance argue that these policies not only stop the misbehavior but deter other students from misbehaving (Skiba & Peterson, 1997). One effect of zero tolerance policies is an increase in OSS. After the Chicago Public Schools adopted a zero tolerance discipline policy, school suspension increased fifty one percent the following year (Ayers, 2001). Because OSS tends to be applied more often to African-American and Hispanic students, zero tolerance is often seen as inequitable. (Verdugo, 2002). The effectiveness and benefits of zero tolerance policies rest with the debate about OSS. If OSS is discredited as an effective disciplinary device, then zero tolerance can hardly be argued as effective educational policy.

Does OSS deter future behavior problems of students? Research does not strongly support the effectiveness of OSS in reducing and eliminating student misconduct. Costenbader and Markson (1997) examined the responses of 252 students who had been suspended during their school career. Sixty nine percent of those surveyed felt that suspension was of little use, and 32% predicted that they would be suspended again. The survey also found that 55% of students suspended were angry at the person who had suspended them. With a large majority of students feeling that suspension was of little use, and with over half reporting a feeling of anger, instead of remorse, this study suggests that OSS may not meet the needs of students with behavior problems.

There is also evidence that the application of OSS falls unevenly across racial lines. Linda M. Raffaele Mendez, Howard M. Knoff, and John Ferron (2002) recently studied the suspension rates and demographic variables of a large, diverse Florida school district. After surveying the data of the districts' 146,000 students, there were several disturbing findings. Black males were the most frequently suspended sub group of students. In both middle school and high school, black males were more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to receive an OSS. Because many African American students have low socio-

economic status (SES), it is often assumed that the student's economic background and home life lead to more disruptive behavior and hence, more suspensions. Hispanic males also had a higher percentage of suspensions than whites, although the difference was not as lopsided. However, previous studies have shown even when SES is controlled, the suspension rates are still higher.(McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Wu, et al., 1982 as reported in Skiba et al. 1997).

TABLE 1: Out of School Suspensions: 1997

Race/Ethnicity	Suspensions	Enrolled	Suspensions as a % of enrollment
American Indian/Native American	37055	521292	7.11
Asian/Pacific Islander	58107	1811691	3.21
Hispanic	424200	6506399	6.52
Black	997596	7720274	12.92
White	1596558	28990899	5.51
Total	3113515	45550555	6.84

Source U.S. Department of Education (1999) (Taken from Verdugo 2002)

Table 1 illustrates the disproportionate numbers of minority suspensions in comparison to the overall suspension rate.

Perhaps the most important issue related to OSS is that it tends to push away the very students who need the most support from school. Suspension places all the blame on the student, the school rarely evaluates whether it has served all of the student's emotional or academic needs. (Deridder, 1990). Often OSS is used to provide relief to teachers, and does not address the issues students have that led to misbehavior (Bock, Tapscott, and Savner, 1998). If OSS is seen from a perspective of learning and learning outcomes, then it rarely functions well. There is little evidence that students learn from their behavior, and that students who are suspended avoid further misbehavior (Morrison & Skiba, 2001). Students most at risk for suspension often have difficult home lives and dangerous peer groups. The act of suspending these students, and leaving them at home in a (typically) unsupervised setting, can actually create more problems for a student (Skiba, 1999).

Health workers and medical doctors have also advocated a decreased use of OSS (Taras et al. 2003). A committee on school health recommended that schools involve a student's pediatrician in evaluating a student who has been suspended or expelled This assessment may secure treatment and help for student's who may be suffering from abuse, depression or mental illness. By involving medical professionals, schools can make a fairer assessment of a student's behavior (Taras, et al., 2003)

To summarize the literature on OSS, there are mixed messages about the overall effectiveness of OSS as a behavior modifier. Although it does remove a disruptive or potentially dangerous student from the academic setting, it offers little to at-risk students in the long term. Many researchers argue that OSS is a reaction to the symptoms, and not the causes, of student misbehavior. By engaging in practices that focus on early intervention, violence and discipline prevention, and by reaching out to at risk students, schools may be able to offer more to their students while also reducing widespread discipline problems (Morrison & Skiba, 2001; Elias, 1998). Other researchers suggest that perhaps the school organization or school culture share at least part of the blame in student behavior (Verdugo, 2002; Raffaele, Mendez, Knoff & Ferron,2002). Although OSS may have some utility in the school, it is clear that there are very real problems with this discipline practice.

In-School Suspension: Research Findings

In school suspension arose because many were frustrated with the discipline design of OSS. Often it was felt that a more rehabilitative model of discipline, which offered positive supports for students who cause problems, could be more effective then the exclusionary model of OSS. ISS is one of the outgrowths of this idea. (Adams, 1992). Because ISS keeps students in the classroom environment, it is possible for school officials to both punish inappropriate behavior, and to intervene in a positive manner with students.

It is important to note that the adoption of an ISS program does not usually result in the elimination of OSS. Parents, educators, students and the community do not feel that ISSis an appropriate punishment for severe problems. (Billings and Enger 1995; as stated in Turpin & Hardin 1997).

The story of ISS is one of both promise and pessimism. There are often limited case examples of schools and districts that use ISS so effectively that it dramatically changes the discipline climate and suspension rate in their schools (Haley 2000; Tomczyk 2000). These case studies show promise, but they tend to be a description of the author's success, instead of a truly objective measure of change. Measured against these models are several research works that see problems with the current ISS framework, but do mention the limited success that ISS has achieved.

A good example of the limited potential an ISS room offers is illustrated by a study done by Tammy Turpin and Dawn Hardin (1997) that focused on a detailed case study of a rural high school's ISS room. The researchers were dealing with a small school that had an enrollment of 364 students with an approximately half white, half black student population. The ISS room that they occupied had no staff, but instead a camera that monitored the students. The principal and his

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secretary monitored the students using this camera, and intervened when students either spoke to each other or disrupted the ISS room.

This study is valuable because it illustrates the bare essentials of an ISS room. Because the school is rural and it is difficult to hire a full time staff member to run the ISS room, the camera is a low cost alternative. There is little help or intervention offered, but the room does act as an effective discipline alternative. Students and teachers both agree that ISS is a real punishment, and that it also functions in making sure students do not get a "vacation" because of an OSS. All of the teacher's surveyed felt that the room helped with classroom discipline. Some students, however, have mixed views on its effects. Several commented to the researcher that ISS was not just a punishment, but also viewed as a place to catch up on sleep.

The overall effect on school discipline was negligible. There was no important change in the number of OSSs. The number of lost instruction days remained the same as well. Many of the staff interviewed reported that they did not understand the purpose or methods of the ISS room. The limited nature of this ISS room did effect changes, but did not come close to the loftier goals that proponents of rehabilitative discipline look for. The perception of school discipline has changed, but the actual numbers of OSS and lost instructional days remained unchanged. The researchers felt that this program was a limited success (Turpin & Hardin, 1997). Although this change in attitude is important, it does not alone validate the effectiveness of this method of ISS.

More prominent case studies have examined large school districts to try and determine the effectiveness of ISS. In a large scale report of a district in Des Moines, Iowa and its ten public middle schools and five public high schools, the positive effect of ISS is noted by the fact that OSS suspensions were severely reduced, because a district goal was to make half of all suspensions "in school" (Prior & Tuller, 1991). The report lists the enthusiasm that several faculty and staff members had towards the initiative, with one vice principal saying, "Obviously in-school suspension is a productive alternative to out-of-school suspension…I know it has an impact on students. When I hear students talk about their ISS experience, they often mention something about the counsel they received" (p.15). This attitude toward the ISS initiative helps illustrate the objectives of ISS.

However, not all that the study reports is perfect. There are serious concerns about the equity of the new program, because three of the participating schools were disproportionately suspending African American students versus other ethnic groups. The report stresses the need to address this issue of equity during the future of the program. Some of the documented problems of OSS (high minority suspension rate) may also apply to certain ISS programs as well.

One *large-scale* (do not italicize) study performed in the Houston public school district examined the effectiveness of student referral center (SRCs) as a means of dealing with discipline problems. An SRC is a centralized district room where students go after creating problems in the regular classroom. In this study, there were 14 SRCs for the 19 participating Houston middle schools. The study surveyed teachers and principals and examined the raw data of the SRCs (Opuni, 1991). They found that the program had a positive impact on the attitudes of the teachers, who felt that they had another discipline option available to them while they tried to control their classes. However, the study also revealed that a lack of resources offered to the centers made their mission less effective. Many of the teachers who ran the SRC stated that there were too many students in their centers, and that this hurt the effectiveness of the SRC. The district had recommended a maximum enrollment of 20 students per center when they had created the program. The study found that five of the 14 centers had a mean enrollment for the 2000-2001 school year exceeding the recommendation, with the most crowded center averaging 25 students each day. The SRC data shows that approximately two thirds of the students attending the SRC were sent for truancy, tardiness or disruptive behavior.

One critical statistic that the Houston study measures is the percent of non-repeat referrals. A high percentage of non-repeaters in an ISS program suggests that some action the program takes corrects the student misbehavior so that they do not have further serious behavior problems. The top SRC had a non-repeat referral rate of 85%, and the lowest SRC had a non-repeat referral rate of 55%. Some of the top performing SRCs did not have a counselor working in them, and one of the top performers had the second highest mean enrollment. It is surprising that some of the top programs in this Houston study were either overcrowded or lacked a counseling component, and the study indicates that further research is needed to explore the difference success rates and the variables that effect them in. It is possible that the reason for varying levels of success could be attributed to the discipline model that the principal and administration adopted for each school, or the personality and dynamics of the SRC staff. The difference in success can not be explained by the current data.

One of the most powerful studies in advocating the use of ISS is the dissertation report by Larry Leapley (1997). After matching up twenty school districts with similar suspension rates in the state of Michigan, Leapley studied the effect that an ISS program would have on the rate of violent acts committed by students. This study is important because it examines the modification of behavior caused by an ISS program, and not merely the drop in OSS. After matching new ISS schools with control schools that had similar suspension rates, he observed that the intervention offered by a trained teacher in ISS helped to reduce the number of

violent acts when compared with the control schools. In fact, all of the experimental schools noted a significant change for the better. This study, although limited, offers potential evidence for the power that a rehabilitative model of ISS can offer schools. Leapley study also worked to isolate schools and match them with schools that had similar characteristics regarding suspensions. In essence, Leapley succeeded in comparing apples to apples, instead of apples to oranges. His research helps point towards the effectiveness that ISS can have, but does not explain how to improve ISS itself.

If ISS is a program that is successful, then what are the magic ingredients for success? Although the majority of educators may argue for more funding or more trained staff as the answer, there is little systematic evidence of the types of programs that work. There are various articles throughout professional education that praise particular programs or interventions, and that detail their success. There is a behavior program in Calgary, Canada that claims to positively affect discipline and suspension rates in "severely at risk students" (Ewashen, et al., 1988). The use of prewriting strategies has been cited as a meaningful behavior changer (Haley 2000). Administrators have praised programs that they began in their school that cut down suspension rates in particular and improved discipline in general (Raebeck, 1993: Tomczyk, 2000). However, all of these case studies followed a very limited research framework and were in no way designed for validity or widescale emulation.

TAB There exists a real need for educators to decide what type of ISS program best fits their students. The review of programs and research seems to at least tentatively suggest that an ISS program is an important component of school discipline that schools need. However, there is little research on the effectiveness of ISS in particular, and suspension in general (Morrison et al., 2001). The varying styles and methods of ISS need to be effectively compared to see how much worth each model has. The use of a full scale rehabilitative model, with its trained staff, accurate record keeping, and student follow up, will cost a district more in time and resources than a punitive model of discipline. There must be some consensus on how valuable differing models of ISS have, so that schools can make informed choices on whether to adapt ISS, and which form of ISS to adapt. Research has to move in this direction if the discipline consequences that we choose for students are to act as an ultimate benefit.

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