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DON'T SUSPEND ME!

An Alternative Discipline Toolkit

SECOND EDITION

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Building a Case for Alternative Discipline

"A STUDENT STRUGGLING TO READ IS NOT SENT HOME AND EXPECTED TO RETURN READING FLUENTLY, SO WHY IS IT THAT A STUDENT STRUGGLING TO BEHAVE IS SENT HOME AND EXPECTED TO RETURN BEHAVING DECENTLY?"

The first known use and origin of the word *discipline* dates back to the 13th century from the Latin word *disciplina*, meaning teaching and learning. Today, some define discipline as training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character; others define discipline as a verb that means to punish in order to gain control or enforce obedience. While many would disagree on the meaning and purpose of discipline, it remains one of the most commonly stated reasons for not having enough time for effective implementation of school or classroom programs/initiatives. While true, however, using a reactive discipline approach actually takes more time in the long run than a preventive approach. Effective discipline should be designed to improve behavior, rather than dismissing it for a few days through suspension and hoping the student returns to school "fixed." This requires thinking beyond the traditional method of sending students home and hoping that either (a) their parents will teach them not to do it again, or (b) being home from school will teach them not to do it again. In fact, the research demonstrates the contrary. We will begin making our case by comparing the evolution of both academic and behavior systems in schools.

Prior to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, the traditional method of deciding whether a struggling student receives extra

time and support through special education was with the *discrepancy model*. Under the discrepancy model, action would not take place until there was a discrepancy between a student's expected achievement and their actual achievement. Simply put, a school had to wait for a student to fail before providing the supports necessary to accelerate learning. Under this model, as McCook (2006, p. 1) states, "It must be the child's fault, or the problem certainly must be the child. Why else would the child have such a discrepancy between expected achievement and actual achievement?" The "wait to fail" model produced a large number of students misidentified as requiring special education services and a disproportionate number of racial minority students misdiagnosed with a learning disability. The introduction of 2004 IDEA allowed schools to use the response to intervention (RTI) framework for identification purposes, which means only after students have failed responding to a series of timely, systematic, increasingly focused, and intensive research-based interventions will a student be considered for special education services. RTI allows schools to identify the kinds of support struggling students need and provide individualized support when it's needed.

Exclusionary discipline practices are equivalent to using the wait-to-fail approach in academics; both are reactionary, not preventive. Having an effective system of tiered supports in place (see the *PBIS Tier 1, 2, 3 Handbook Series* [Hannigan & Hauser, 2014; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2018a, 2018b] and the book *Behavior Solutions* [Hannigan et al., 2020]) coupled with an innovative response to students who misbehave (this book) does to behavior systems what 2004 IDEA and RTI were designed to do for academic systems.

The traditional mindset about student learning shifted from being the "child's fault" in a discrepancy model toward a belief that all students can and will learn. With this belief, every resource and support is exhausted to provide a student with the resources needed to support learning. However, when it comes to behavior, do we believe that every student can and will behave? Do we exhaust every resource and provide every strategy to support a student in their behavior, or do we use suspension as our only means to "teach" a student how to behave? Using suspension is the reactive wait-to-fail model for behavior. Is behavior RTI (preventive discipline) visible on your campus? Or does your system respond to behavior today with the same approach schools responded to academics 20 years ago?

Over the past few decades, methods of disciplining K–12 students have transformed significantly when compared to traditional practices, however, still not to the level it should be. Subsequently, the 2014 data findings from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights on School Discipline revealed:

- African American students are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of white students. On average, 5% of white students are suspended, compared to 16% of Black students.
- Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (13%) than students without disabilities (6%).
- More than one out of four boys of color with disabilities (served by IDEA)—and nearly one in five girls of color with disabilities—receives an out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

Changes in state and federal policy have necessitated shifts in methods such as corporal punishment, zero tolerance, and use of exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions toward creating positive behavioral environments. In analyzing over 25 years of research on discipline approaches, researchers found that out-of-school suspension and zero-tolerance approaches to discipline do not reduce or prevent misbehavior and actually correlate with lower achievement (Irvin et al., 2004; Losen, 2011; Mayer, 1995; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). In fact, this form of traditional discipline does not make the school feel safer and results in negative outcomes for the child and the community (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Similarly, Balfanz and Boccanfuso (2007) found that students who were suspended and/or expelled were more likely to be held back a grade or drop out of school. Specifically, the greatest loss of instruction due to suspensions is in middle school and in both middle school and early high school grade levels, students who get suspended are even more likely to drop out of high school compared to students who have not been suspended (Balfanz & Fox, 2014; Rumberger & Losen, 2017). Losen and Martin (2018) found students of color and students with disabilities lose far more instruction than their peers even with federal law protections in place for districts to ensure due process and prevent unjust punishment. Unfortunately, this protection/safeguard is not officially triggered until after 10 days lost, contributing to the narrative of students with disabilities losing 22 more days per 100 enrolled compared to students without disabilities even with the protection of federal law (Losen & Martin, 2018).

Furthermore, the likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system is increased significantly for students addressed with a traditional discipline approach (Leone et al., 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003). We often hear, "the other students can't learn with this student in my class!"; Perry and Morris (2014) found that higher levels of exclusionary discipline within schools over time generate collateral damage, negatively affecting the academic achievement of *non-suspended* students in punitive contexts. Chard et al. (1992) summarized discipline practices in education by stating that, "there is one burden that consumes more time, energy, and attention than any other . . . school discipline" (p. 19). Therefore, it is not a surprise that when problem behaviors occur in schools, common practice has been to react in a stringent manner, which has not been demonstrated to be successful for all (Chard et al., 1992).

Hattie's (2018) *Visible Learning* meta-analysis that resulted in 250+ influences on student learning reveals an effect size of −0.20 for school suspensions, which represents a negative (or reverse) effect on student learning. Of the 250+ influences, less than 5% had a negative effect and suspension is one of them.

Although there is an overwhelming abundance of evidence demonstrating the negative effects of suspension, it continues to be the most commonly used method of discipline throughout the nation. We understand choosing alternative forms of discipline will be more challenging and time-consuming in the beginning. Here are some common oppositional messages we hear as we present our approach on discipline. Do any of these messages sound familiar?

But . . .

"I had to make an example out of him."

"I don't have time to do it the other way."

"I want my teachers to know I support them."

"We need to inconvenience the parents."

"I don't want the other parents to feel that nothing was done."

"We need a break from this student."

"Alternatives require more work and are more time-consuming."

"There is no way we have the time or staffing to do this."

"Why not just suspend?"

When suspending a student (knowing full well that suspensions will not change behavior), what are the actual outcomes expected from the suspension? The statements above are excuses that dismiss a student's behavior for a few days, making it easier for the adults involved. The oppositional messages above can be grouped into three categories that "save."

The Three Saves of Suspension

Save time:

"I don't have time to do it the other way."

"There is no way we have the time or staffing to do this."

Save face:

"I don't want the other parents to feel that nothing was done."

"I want my teachers to know I support them."

"We need to inconvenience the parents."

"I had to make an example out of him."

Save energy:

"Alternatives require more work and are more time-consuming."

"We need a break from this student."

Notice how everything being "saved" is for the benefit of adults and not the students at risk of failure. Students frequently suspended have an increased likelihood of dropping out of high school; a high school dropout will earn 35 cents for every dollar a college graduate earns and 60 cents for every dollar a high school graduate earns (OECD, 2014). High school dropouts are 63 times more likely to be incarcerated

(Breslow, 2012). California, for example, is expected to spend more than $62,000 on each prison inmate—almost seven times the $9,200 it will spend for each K–12 student (Hanson & Stipek, 2014). On average, each high school dropout costs taxpayers $292,000 over that dropout's lifetime (Breslow, 2012). Furthermore, female dropouts will live an average of 10 and a half fewer years than females who graduate from college. Male dropouts will live an average of 13 fewer years than males who graduate from college (Tavernise, 2012).

Knowing the negative outcomes suspensions produce, educators still use these oppositional messages as excuses that help them save time, save face, and save energy. Discipline practices need to shift from convenience for adults to saving lives and reshaping a student's path toward a successful future.

If another opposition is that it is too time-consuming to use alternatives and easier to send a student home rather than teach them correct behavior, consider this: A typical suspension based on our collective experiences as site administrators takes approximately up to two hours of an administrator's time (interviews, investigations, paperwork, phone calls, and meeting with parents, etc.). Suspensions do not correct the behavior and will likely repeat, leading to multiple two-hour occurrences. Using the suspendable incident as a teaching opportunity will reduce the recidivism of a repeated occurrence, consequently leading to fewer suspensions and significantly decreasing the amount of time spent disciplining. The Time Cost of Suspension visual below is an example of the cost of 30 suspensions a year or 50 suspensions a year at a school on administrators, teachers, and students. For the case of this example, let's assume the average suspension day per student is two days (which is typical for average days assigned to students who receive a suspension).

Time Cost of Suspension		
	30 Suspensions a Year	**50 Suspensions a Year**
Administrator Time (i.e., investigation, communication, documentation) *2 hours per suspension	60 Hours	100 Hours
Teacher Time (i.e., documentation, student work preparation) *1 hour per suspension	30 Hours	50 Hours
Student Time (i.e., instructional time lost) *2 hours from day of incident and 14 hours for 2 days of suspension on average	480 Hours	800 Hours
Totals	570 Hours	950 Hours

If preventive and effective discipline is a priority, you will make it one of the central initiatives at your school. To make this work, it is critical to intentionally create a system designed to support alternative discipline. Here are seven actions to consider to successfully make time for alternative discipline:

Communicate Beliefs about Discipline. As educators, we approach instruction with the belief that every student can and will learn. With this belief, we exhaust every resource and support necessary to improve learning. As an administrator, you have to question your own beliefs about discipline. Do you believe every student can and will behave decently? Is every resource and strategy exhausted to support a student in their behavior, or is suspension used as the only means to "teach" a student how to behave? If you believe what you are currently doing is working, there is no compelling reason to change. If you do not believe in preventive discipline, it will not be an expectation nor a priority in your school.

Invest in Preventive Response to Intervention (RTI) Systems for Both Academics and Behavior. Invest in building your school staff's understanding around creating effective systems for responding to students school-wide, targeted/at-risk groups, and individualized both in academics and behavior. Investing here will give you more time to focus on a preventive model rather than a reactive one. Initial best teaching and best classroom management will support approximately 80% of your students in both academics and behavior. It is also imperative to organize your school's targeted/at-risk and individualized interventions for students who are not responding to the school-wide approach.

Encourage Visibility and Active Supervision. As an administrator, it is critical to be out of your office and visible to students and staff to build effective relationships and make meaningful connections with students. Active supervision requires an intentional focus on movement, scanning, and positive interactions during supervision; this is essential and needs to be modeled by the administrator. Taking the time to train your staff on visibility and active supervision will save you the time of responding to behavior incidents due to deficiencies in supervision from staff.

Invest in Gaining Faculty Commitment and Ownership. Take time to educate your staff on alternative discipline approaches. Make it a priority to share school behavior data, gather input from the staff, and work with staff on discipline so they feel part of the process. Share effective discipline success stories with the staff. If you take the time to do this and make yourself available to have difficult ongoing conversations around beliefs, you will see more ownership with staff when handling minor discipline and increased buy-in on major (administrator-handled) discipline. Communication is also key for staff to understand the logic behind alternative discipline. Discipline will become a team effort in supporting a student, rather than something only executed and monitored by an administrator.

Create and Nurture a Behavior Team. It is critical for every school to have a behavior team (i.e., PBIS team, Leadership Team) designed to set behavior expectations and goals, to establish and monitor behavior interventions, and to support preventive systems work. An administrator who provides a team the opportunity to meet on a regular basis to discuss school-wide, targeted/small group, and individualized behavior data and trends will benefit. This allows for data to be used to provide interventions for students by name, by need—instead of after they've escalated to the next level of discipline. Make sure the social-emotional experts on campus, such as a school counselor or school psychologist, are an active part of the behavior team. Designate this time with your behavior team; use a monitoring tool to ensure data are used to identify and monitor the progress of focus students. The emphasis here is to get to the students before they get to you.

Create a Toolkit of Effective Discipline. Organize preventive discipline ideas in a toolkit for future reference. As you conduct discipline in this manner, you will begin using a set of actions you tend to assign; therefore, when you have another similar incident, you can reference your toolkit to help save time. The alternatives in this book are designed to give options and examples of alternative forms of discipline used to correct misbehavior. This book will change your thinking about discipline. As you see how students respond to the alternatives provided, you will begin to innovate and think of your own new methods aligned to this framework to support students.

Support a System and Philosophy for Alternatives. Make sure the alternative discipline you assign is implemented with fidelity and effectively communicated to all stakeholders. Understand that establishing this will require time and human capital to implement and monitor with success. Although it may be challenging to allocate so many resources for one student, the ultimate goal is to help the student learn and change their behavior. Without an intentional focus on alternatives, the student will continue taking away time from your staff throughout the school year with continuing behavior challenges, since the function of the student's behavior was never addressed. Teaching desired outcomes through alternatives to suspension will reduce the frequency of repeat offenses, thus creating less time dealing with discipline than using suspension alone.