

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL
Foundation
FOR
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



**TEACHING AND LEARNING
RESEARCH EXCHANGE**

**In-School
Suspension –
Is It Working?**

Michele Smith and Roza Gray

Project #36
August 2001

This research was partially funded through a grant from the McDowell Foundation. However, the points of view and opinions expressed in project documents are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

The purpose of the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching is to fund research, inquiry and dissemination of information focusing on instruction (both teaching and learning) in the context of the public elementary and secondary education system. Specifically, it will:

- 1) contribute to knowledge about teaching and learning;
- 2) encourage educational inquiry through a wide range of methodologies;
- 3) support the involvement of practising teachers in active research projects;
- 4) encourage organizations as well as individuals to determine and act in areas of research and inquiry; and
- 5) encourage experimentation with innovative ideas and methodologies related to teaching and learning.

The Foundation is an independent charitable organization formed by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation in 1991. It is governed by a Board of Directors with the assistance of an Advisory Committee of representatives from the educational and business communities. The selection and evaluation of projects funded by the Foundation is carried out by a teacher-led Project Review Committee. Inquiries concerning research supported by the McDowell Foundation may be directed to the following address:

Research Coordinator
Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation
2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8
Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or (306) 373-1660

Table of Contents

Project Summary	2
Introduction	5
Primary Goals – School Level Initiatives	6
How are these school goals being met?	7
Roadblocks	8
Conclusions – School Goals	10
Secondary Goal – Personal Level Initiatives	11
How was the goal met?	11
Roadblocks	13
Conclusions – Personal Goals	14
Summary	17
Recommendations	18
References	20

Project Summary

In-school suspension (ISS) programs are widely adopted and have become an accepted method of discipline, but measures of their success are less clear. It is obvious that they provide many benefits, including reducing out-of-school suspensions, offering schools another disciplinary alternative, and affording students an opportunity to stay in school and keep current in their work. However, if in-school suspensions are to be genuinely positive disciplinary experiences, they should also provide remedial approaches that treat the underlying cause of the misbehaviour, reducing the likelihood of recurrence.

The ISS program at A. E. Peacock Collegiate in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan has two sets of goals that are evaluated in this report. The first set of goals is school-related, reflecting the expectations of the program at its inception and the additional school-related responsibilities the program took on as it evolved. While these school-related goals were met with success, it became clear, since the program saw many “repeat customers”, that suspensions were not sufficient to have students correct misbehaviour. If the program were to be more effective and authentic as positive discipline, it needed a greater rehabilitative focus to address the reasons students earned suspensions, and mindful of these reasons, it needed to provide intervention that would correct the misbehaviour. As a result, the secondary goal of the program was developed to focus on changes on a personal level for students – changes that would see a reduction in the return rate to the ISS program.

The initiatives designed to meet each of these goals are considered in turn.

PRIMARY GOALS – SCHOOL LEVEL INITIATIVES

The initial goals of the ISS program included provision of the following:

1. An alternative to out-of-school suspensions.
2. An additional means of keeping students accountable for their behaviour.
3. A supportive environment for suspended students to complete assignments so they can return to classes up-to-date after the duration of the suspension.
4. A structured means of communicating with parents or guardians of suspended students.

As soon as the program was instituted, each of these goals was met to varying degrees. Furthermore, the teachers in the ISS room also coordinated out-of-school suspensions, recorded all data on suspensions (in and out of school), verified unexcused absences with parents, supervised exams, helped students who needed to catch up on school work as a result of lengthy absences and provided a room for time-outs.

Roadblocks to the accomplishment of these school-related goals are complex. A number of practical problems are faced in the day-to-day operation of the program, including the timely assignment of meaningful work for suspended students and consistent communication with parents. Due diligence is required on behalf of the ISS administrative and teaching staff to maximize the learning opportunity that suspensions can provide to students. Further challenges to the program include differing staff viewpoints on the nature and role of the ISS room as part of the school's discipline policy. The views of the school staff are influential and varied. As a result, regular dialogue is necessary regarding the role of a teacher as a disciplinarian, the difference between discipline and punishment as it reflects on the ISS room, and the importance of the ISS room as a part of the school discipline policy. Also, staff discussion on the importance of discipline versus punishment would advance development of the school's discipline policy and enhance the learning opportunity provided by in-school suspensions as it would foster a greater understanding of student and school needs regarding discipline.

SECONDARY GOAL – PERSONAL LEVEL INITIATIVES

The ISS teachers, school administrators and guidance counsellors spearheaded the work towards this goal, which focussed on making the student's suspension a more genuinely positive disciplinary experience. As such, suspensions were structured so that students would not see them as merely punitive; instead, suspensions better addressed the reasons why students were suspended. A reflective component was introduced to every suspension, one that expected students to both think about the consequences of their misbehaviour and make a plan to avoid suspensions in the future. As successful discipline corrects misbehaviour, successful achievement of this goal was expected to reduce the overall number of suspensions and the rate of suspensions per student in the next and successive years of the program.

The findings were disappointing. Over a three-year period with a greater emphasis on student reflection and positive discipline, there were no statistical differences in the return rates of students to the in-school suspension room. Complex calculations comparing suspension rates in and out of school, between male and female students, according to reasons for suspension and length of suspension showed no significant differences. Furthermore, there were no differences in the return rates of suspensions among the groupings of students who were the most or least frequently suspended.

These findings may be related to the difficulties of complex data collection in a dynamic school environment where it is difficult to control all the variables that might influence suspension rates. They may also be related to the day-to-day difficulties of consistently carrying out the procedures identified to encourage reflection and thereby making the suspension a more meaningful disciplinary experience. Further studies with tighter controls are necessary.

Despite the disappointing lack of quantitative support with suspension rates, qualitative measures do indicate that the reflective focus of the ISS program was successful with individual students. Student interviews demonstrated that progress was made with most students in terms of encouraging reflection and corresponding changes in behaviour choices. These changes in student behaviour as a result of being suspended required varying levels of intervention by the ISS program and had different time lines for different students. Students who may be considered at risk, for example, typically are suspended more often, seem to require

greater interventions and need more time to make the changes to their behaviour that would eventually reduce their suspension rates. Such differences are likely due to the importance of reaching students at an emotional level before changes in behaviour are made.

This conclusion and others are carefully considered and discussed in the complete report. The complete report also includes several additional elements not reviewed here because of space limitations, e.g., a lengthy list of recommendations for overcoming roadblocks in the day-to-day operations of an in-school suspension program, suggestions for improvements to existing ISS programs and tips for improving future evaluations of similar programs.

Introduction

For almost 25 years, in-school suspension (ISS) programs have been adopted in various school systems and have gained widespread acceptance as a method of discipline (Sullivan 1989; Reabeck 1993; Downing & Keaster 1998). For parents, teachers and administrators, this disciplinary option is a positive alternative to out-of-school suspensions since it permits students to stay in school and continue to learn while experiencing a consequence for misbehaviour. Although there is value in this itself, many have argued that ISS programs could be made more useful by focussing efforts on lowering the number of discipline violations and reducing the return rate of students to in-school suspensions (Short & Noblit 1985; Miller 1992; Black 1999). Such goals are critical if in-school suspensions are to be genuinely positive disciplinary alternatives because “the fundamental purpose of discipline is to provide remedial treatment that identifies the underlying problem and eventually improves or corrects misbehaviour, and not simply to inflict a penalty that temporarily extinguishes the undesirable behaviour” (Sullivan 1989, p. 33).

The in-school suspension program at A.E. Peacock Collegiate in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan saw the same evolution as is described in the literature. It was originally conceived as a means to reduce out-of-school suspensions and keep students current in their schoolwork. While these program goals were met successfully, the program saw many “repeat customers”. It became apparent that suspensions were not sufficient to have students correct misbehaviour, and if the ISS program was to be a genuinely successful disciplinary alternative, it needed a greater rehabilitative focus. That is, it needed to address the reasons students earned suspensions, and mindful of these reasons, it needed to provide intervention that would correct the misbehaviour. The program evaluation described in this report was motivated by this shift to genuine discipline in the ISS program.

In order to evaluate a program, it is necessary to reflect on its goals. Since the goals of the ISS program at A.E. Peacock Collegiate are twofold, similarly, this evaluation is divided into two parts. The initial goals of the program were primarily focussed on change at a school level. To provide a few examples of school-level goals from the detailed discussion that will follow, the program sent a message to students and parents about accountability and the importance of staying in school; students learned that suspensions could no longer be considered a holiday; and students were provided with a means to become up-to-date in their studies. As the ISS program evolved into a more genuine disciplinary alternative, the goals of the program became more rehabilitative in nature, focussing on changes on a personal level for students. Promoting individual student reflection to reduce misbehaviour became a key element of the program. The effectiveness of the techniques chosen to meet this goal will be evaluated and discussed later in the report.

Primary Goals – School Level Initiative

A.E. Peacock Collegiate is the largest high school (grades 9 to 12) in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, with approximately 830 students. The varied needs of the students are met with A.E. Peacock Collegiate's strong academic, fine arts, industrial arts and athletic programs. It is also home to the city's only School Age Parent Program, In School Suspension Program and School Work Program which provides alternative education programs. Of these, the staff has had greatest input into the development of the ISS program as a part of the school's discipline policy. The coordinators of the ISS room and the administration guide data gathering and explore ideas to further enhance the effectiveness of the program.

When the ISS program was established at A. E. Peacock Collegiate in 1993, it was presented as a part of Moose Jaw School Division's Stay in School initiative. It became part of the Division's safety net for "at risk" students in that it provided an additional step in a series of graduated consequences for misbehaviour, providing time and opportunity for students to "turn themselves around". This opportunity for in-school suspensions is provided through A. E. Peacock Collegiate for the entire school division, although it primarily serves the school in which it is housed.

The structured program of in-school suspensions is clearly preferable to out-of-school suspensions for many offences. Prior to institution of the ISS program, the primary reason for out-of-school suspensions (OSS) was the missing of detentions assigned for unexcused absences from school. The ridiculousness of suspending students from school for missing school was lost on no one. A further drawback to OSS is that the benefits of making students accountable for misbehaviour through suspensions were often outweighed by the academic hardships OSS posed for students who were often already struggling.

As a result of these concerns, the initial goals of the ISS program included the following:

1. To provide an alternative to out-of-school suspensions.
2. To provide an additional means of keeping students accountable for their behaviour.
3. To provide suspended students with a supportive environment to complete assignments so they can return to classes up-to-date after the duration of the suspension.
4. To provide a structured means of communicating with parents or guardians of suspended students.

As soon as the ISS program was instituted, each of the goals stated above was met to varying degrees. Reflection on the day-to-day operations of the program and the needs of the school resulted in additional goals being set for the program. The success of the program in meeting these goals is discussed in the next section.

HOW ARE THESE SCHOOL GOALS BEING MET?

1. TO PROVIDE AN ALTERNATIVE TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS.

The number of out-of-school suspensions (OSS) dropped dramatically as soon as the structured provision of in-school suspensions became available. In-school suspensions are now assigned in place of out-of-school suspensions for skipping classes, skipping detention and disruptive behaviour. Out-of-school suspensions are still assigned for serious offences such as fighting, vandalism, stealing and harassment, and they are used with chronic offenders of violations that initially result in ISS.

2. TO PROVIDE AN ADDITIONAL MEANS OF KEEPING STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR BEHAVIOUR.

As well as being assigned for offences that previously earned OSS, ISS are assigned for incomplete homework, smoking and tardiness. They are also assigned as “timeouts” for less serious disruptive classroom behaviour and as an opportunity to “catch up” for students whose absences from school have impeded their ability to stay current with assignments. The ISS teachers facilitate this learning until class re-entry is appropriate.

As a result of the many uses of the ISS room, the number of students who visit the ISS room has increased over the last number of years. In the ISS program’s first year, an average of 50 students per month visited the in-school suspension room. At present, the average month sees approximately 65 student suspensions, with some months seeing as many as 92 suspensions and other months as few as 26. Over the course of a school year, approximately one quarter of the student population is suspended in school for one day or more.

3. TO PROVIDE SUSPENDED STUDENTS WITH A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT TO COMPLETE ASSIGNMENTS SO THEY CAN RETURN TO CLASSES CAUGHT UP AFTER THE DURATION OF THE SUSPENSION.

When students are suspended, classroom teachers are contacted by the ISS teacher and asked to provide work for the suspended student. The ISS teacher then monitors the student’s work and tutors the student through the assignments as needed. The work assigned to students in ISS must be completed to the satisfaction of the ISS and classroom teachers before the student is permitted to return to class. As a result, ISS affords an opportunity to “catch up” on work that is capitalized upon by some teachers and students. In fact, some students are so encouraged by the amount of school work they complete in the in-school suspension room that they look forward to the quiet time of a suspension!

4. TO PROVIDE A STRUCTURED MEANS OF COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS OR GUARDIANS OF SUSPENDED STUDENTS.

When students are assigned to the ISS room, a parent or guardian of the student is contacted and informed of the reason for the suspension, the expectations of the ISS room and the duration of the suspension. This contact with the parent is positively received by most parents and is

often sufficient to discourage some students from repeating the rule infraction that led to the suspension. In situations where there are repeated rule transgressions, this communication with the home serves to develop a team approach to solving the problems experienced by the student who is not meeting the expectations of the school.

5. OTHER GOALS SET FOR THE ISS PROGRAM SINCE ITS INCEPTION.

In time, the ISS program evolved to meet other school needs. For example, the ISS teachers are now responsible for the coordination of all out-of-school suspensions and the collection of data related to them. Furthermore, the ISS teachers act as attendance officers by verifying unexcused absences with parents or guardians, and they also assist school administration with the provision of a time out room, a location for supervised student exams and a temporary classroom while administrative tasks (e.g., investigations) are completed.

Although the day-to-day procedures of the ISS room allow the program to meet all the initial program goals and some additional ones set in response to school needs, the program still has its difficulties. As described in the following section, the effort of meeting the school level goals identified above requires a school commitment that is strenuous to maintain.

ROADBLOCKS

The roadblocks to successful accomplishment of the program goals are complex. They include practical questions from teachers related to a specific program goal, such as: *“What meaningful work can I send from my industrial arts class to a student suspended for three days in the ISS room?”* They also include pedagogical questions that challenge the foundation of the program itself, such as: *“Why should a student suspended for a misbehaviour in another class therefore miss the academic lessons in my class?”* This discussion will deal first with the practical problems faced in the day-to-day operation of the ISS room.

Critical to the smooth functioning of the ISS room is the need for timely assignment of appropriate school work. Early notification to teachers that one of their students is suspended is vital if teachers are to be given adequate opportunity to prepare assignments and to be sure that suspended students have work to do. It is difficult to provide a meaningful assignment on a short time-line in a busy day for just one student. Certainly this creates more work for teachers. To further complicate matters, it is difficult to assign meaningful assignments when the class work to be missed is skills-based (e.g., work in industrial arts) or is based on class attendance (e.g., lab work, videos or presentations). Suspended students sometimes need to make after-hours arrangements with some subject area teachers to catch up on class time and work.

Special projects are created and assigned by some subject area teachers to be completed specifically by students who are suspended. Skill development assignments created and/or imposed by the ISS teachers are also used. These assignments may keep the suspended students productively engaged in learning, but they are often met with resistance when the suspended students view the

additional assignments as punishment. Viewed in this way, the assignments face an uphill battle for quality completion. However, these struggles are part of the challenge of working with suspended students and will continue to be a part of the day-to-day running of the ISS program. As long as teachers are willing to take the time to create meaningful learning opportunities for students who are suspended, the ISS program will be able to provide students with a supportive environment to learn while they are being made accountable for their actions through suspensions.

Another goal of the program, communication with parents (or guardians) to share information on student progress and to work together to prevent further suspensions, is more difficult than may be initially perceived. First, not all adolescents live with a parent (or guardian) and the guidance that could be provided from these adults may be minimal. Second, although many parents are supportive of the school's efforts to make students accountable for their actions and actively promote a positive attitude conducive of a return to class, other parents are not. In those instances, the school may be alone in its efforts to change the behaviour of a wayward student. Nonetheless, contact with a parent is still a key goal of the ISS program, which seeks to forge a team approach to discipline with a student and his/her parents (or guardians).

The ISS goal of providing a positive alternative to OSS is largely supported by the school, parents and staff members who see its reasonableness. Some staff members, however, believe that the teachers involved in the ISS program could be better used elsewhere, for example, to reduce class sizes. It is important to note that this program is funded separately, and if the ISS program were eliminated, its elimination would have no bearing on class size. This kind of challenge to the program speaks to both the difficulty of maintaining open communication in a large, busy high school and the differing viewpoints on student discipline to be found within a large school staff.

The role of the ISS program as part of the school's discipline plan is viewed differently by various staff members. For example, some teachers believe that a strength of the program is its supportive nature, which acts as a safety net to students who are rejected by the school system and would otherwise drop out (or do something even worse, as in the tragic cases in Columbine and Taber). Other staff members take a different view, stating that in-school suspensions need to be made unpleasant in order to act as a deterrent. One teacher stated, "Make it a place that a student won't want to be." It would seem impossible to find a compromise to these opposing positions, yet a balance is necessary. Students need to feel supported by the ISS program, but they should not use it as an escape from classrooms. The program sees students who genuinely dislike being suspended in school and creatively try to avoid it, while others like the quiet space to complete their work and the opportunity to talk to the staff members about their troubles. However, even those students who initially like being suspended in school eventually tire of it and work to avoid in-school suspensions in the future.

Related to the staff concerns that the ISS room should act as a deterrent are criticisms of the guidelines regarding when and how often a student can receive in-school suspensions. "School can only go so far to accommodate students who skip classes or don't do their homework. The students need to come up with their own personal program," said one staff member. Another took the opposite position, stating, "I would rather have the suspended student in my class than in ISS." To respond to such differing positions, one must be thoughtful about discipline. Miller (1992, p. 28) says, "Successful educators see student discipline as a function as their role of a teacher, not as an opposing force to it. Dealing with student misbehaviour is part of the teacher's responsibility because instruction and

discipline interact to influence the growth and attitude of the student.” Simply put, teachers cannot divorce a student’s misbehaviour from their responsibilities to teach that student academic or other lessons. Teachers must, therefore, be supportive of suspensions as part of the school’s discipline policy if students are to benefit from the experience as a form of discipline. As one staff member said, “Every teacher must buy into the program or in some cases it teaches the kids nothing.”

Underlying the differing viewpoints on the nature and role of the ISS room as part of the school’s discipline policy is a tension based on pedagogy. Some teachers believe that student misbehaviour needs to be punished, and this is confused with discipline, which it is not. Discipline is part of a supportive pro-active process, which involves natural consequences and the teaching of social responsibilities. Punishment, on the other hand, is a reactive intervention with the imposition of arbitrary consequences by adults who place emphasis on obedience. Further, discipline expects control by inner values while punishment imposes control by external rule enforcement. The emphasis of the ISS program needs to be discipline: teaching students to be socially responsible and thoughtful about their actions and the consequences that follow. Teachers who believe that suspensions need to be punishing will not be satisfied with the program or support it. This point leads us to a discussion of the secondary goals of the program, which focus on use of in-school suspensions as positive discipline and not punishment.

CONCLUSIONS – SCHOOL GOALS

The initial goals of the ISS program are met through day-to-day operations. The in-school suspension room provides an alternative to OSS, an additional means of keeping students accountable for their behaviour, a supportive environment to complete assignments and a structured means of communicating with parents. In addition, the teachers in the ISS room also coordinate out-of-school suspensions, record all data on suspensions, verify unexcused absences with parents, supervise exams, help students who need to catch up on school work as a result of lengthy absences and provide a room for time-outs.

The in-school suspension room clearly serves many functions. As a result, the selection of ISS teachers is critical to its success. The views of the school staff are influential, not only to the smooth functioning of the ISS room, but also in guaranteeing that suspensions are meaningful learning experiences for students. To this end, a discussion regarding the role of a teacher as a disciplinarian, the difference between discipline and punishment as it reflects on the ISS room, and the importance of the ISS room as a part of the school discipline policy needs to be held from time to time with the teaching staff. Further, staff dialogue on the importance of discipline versus punishment advances development of the school’s discipline policy, and enhances the learning opportunity provided by in-school suspensions, since it fosters a greater understanding of student and school needs regarding discipline.

Secondary Goal – Personal Level Initiatives

As previously stated, while the initial goals of the ISS program were primarily school-based, the secondary goal, spearheaded by the ISS teachers, school administrators and guidance counsellors, focussed on making the student's suspension a genuinely positive disciplinary experience. Suspensions were structured so students would not see them as merely punitive; instead, they better addressed the reasons why students were suspended. A reflective component was introduced to every suspension, one that expected students to be both thoughtful about the consequences of their misbehaviour and to make a plan to avoid suspensions in the future. As successful discipline corrects misbehaviour, successful achievement of this goal was expected to reduce the return rate of students to the ISS room. This rate was measured by the overall number of suspensions and the rate of suspensions per student in the next and successive years of the program.

HOW WAS THE GOAL MET?

A number of changes were made to the ISS program to make suspensions more rehabilitative in nature by focussing on the reasons for the misbehaviour and not merely providing a consequence for rule infractions. Key program changes included the institution of a Reflection Sheet, Reflection Packages and a greater involvement of parents, guidance counsellors and school administration. Students were expected to be introspective about their behaviour and make a plan to avoid further suspensions. Parental involvement in the student's plan to avoid further suspensions became a greater priority. In addition, an action plan was set up for successive suspensions.

The action plan included a graduated series of consequences for student suspensions. The first suspension for any reason resulted in step one in the series of consequences, the completion of a reflection sheet. The sheet asked students to explain why they were suspended, what the consequences of this behaviour are and how they can avoid being suspended for this reason in the future. The purpose of completing the sheet was twofold: first, the sheet encouraged a student to be thoughtful about the actions and choices that led to the suspension; and second, it provided the in-school suspension teacher with a springboard for dialogue. The teacher used the student responses on the reflection sheet to have a dialogue with the student about both the consequences of the misbehaviour that led to the suspension, and the development of an individualized student plan to avoid future suspensions. This dialogue, carefully lead by the ISS teacher, was clearly about choices and consequences and not merely a reminder of school rules. The teachers sought to find the root cause of the misbehaviour. Through an open exchange with the ISS teacher, students found themselves an advocate, advisor or counsellor. When the ISS teacher felt the suspended student was in need of additional intervention, the guidance counsellor was notified and asked to provide the student with counselling.

A second suspension for the same offence resulted in the assignment of a reflection package. This step in the series of responses by the ISS program expected students to spend a greater amount of time considering the actions that led to suspension. The reflection packages, typically lengthy, asked students to describe the reasons for their suspensions and to respond to scenarios similar to the one for which they were suspended (for good sample suspension packages, see the 1992 book by C. MacWilliams). The ISS teacher discussed the completed reflection package with the student and notified a parent or guardian of the suspension.

Students suspended three or more times for the same offence were treated on a case by case basis. Some were asked to complete a second version of a reflection package; others were given the reflection sheet again and asked to discuss it with the suspension teacher, guidance counsellor or administrator in more detail. In addition, intervention sometimes included a referral to the guidance counsellor and/or a meeting with the parents/guardians, the suspended student, the school administration and a guidance counsellor. For some students, repeated suspensions resulted in out-of-school suspensions and/or placement in an alternative school setting. In rare instances, students were removed from classes for a period of time and asked to return with a demonstrated change in behaviour and attitude regarding school.

The students' suspensions were recorded, and data regarding the completion of the reflection sheets, reflection packages and interventions with the administration and guidance counsellors were also kept over a three-year period. As indicated, the goal of the program was to become genuinely disciplinary in nature so that those students who were suspended would be less likely to be suspended again. Achievement of this goal was expected to result in a reduced rate of suspensions in the next and successive years of the program.

The findings were disappointing. Over a three-year period with a greater emphasis on student reflection and positive discipline, there were no statistical differences in the return rate to the in-school suspension room. Complex calculations comparing suspension rates in and out of school, between male and female students, by reasons for suspension and length of suspension showed no significant differences. Further, there were no differences in the return rates of suspensions among the groupings of students who were the most or least frequently suspended. The explanation for these discouraging results is explored in the section on roadblocks given below.

Despite the lack of statistical support for the impact of the program change, student interviews suggested that progress had been made. On the basis of gender, grade and number of suspensions, 38 pupils were selected as a representative sample of the students suspended during a given year. These students were interviewed by an independent person not associated with the school. Two-thirds indicated that they thought about why they were suspended; some students indicated that the reflection packages helped them to think about why they were suspended and what they should do next time in a similar situation. Moreover, approximately 70 percent of the students stated that they thought about how they would avoid suspensions in the future. Follow-up interviews with individual students who were chronically suspended indicated that the benefits of talking to suspension teachers included: "[you] get help from the teachers", "I learned I deserved it", and "[I learned] . . . it was better to learn from my mistake the first time . . . made me think about consequences." It is disappointing that these positive statements about the impact of the program were not evident as statistically significant changes in student behaviour as measured by return rates to ISS. The impact of the discipline program appears to be highly dependent on the individual student.

ROADBLOCKS

There are two parts to the explanation for why there were no significant statistical differences in the return rates of suspensions after the change in the program focus. First, the complexity of the data collection and the cross year comparisons needs to be considered. Second, it was difficult to remain entirely consistent in the day-to-day procedures of the ISS room.

DATA COLLECTION. For the seven years the ISS program has been in place, data have been collected on student demographics (e.g., gender, grade, dropouts), the nature of suspensions (ISS or OSS), the reason for suspensions and the frequency of suspensions. Comparison of the return rate of suspensions before the ISS program implemented new procedures to meet its secondary program goal to the return rates of previous years showed no differences, despite a complicated recording system. The total number of suspensions and the average number of suspensions per student similarly showed no significant differences. Data collection required the use of more than 150 variables to balance all the reasons for suspensions in and out of school, by year of the study, grade, gender, semester, school year, number of suspensions, and steps in the series of consequences for repeated suspensions for the same and other offences. Data comparisons from year to year also needed to control for changes in school discipline policies (on tardiness, smoking and skipping of classes, to name a few) that affected suspension rates. Despite all these subtle manipulations and controls, the data indicated no significant changes in the suspension rate across years of the program. This lack of any reduction is likely due to other changes that may have confounded the data.

Data collection was affected by a number of variables. Changes in school administration affected the consistency with which students were assigned suspensions. In addition, changes in ISS teachers may have meaningfully influenced reporting procedures from year to year. It is likely that factors outside the scope of this study, such as changes in the school discipline policy, influenced the rates of suspensions for particular offences. Taken together with changes that may have influenced the overall suspension rate and data collection, such as changes in staffing, the statistical comparisons of interest in this study became so terribly confounded that they are meaningless, despite the complicated recording system.

CONSISTENCY OF PROCEDURES. The procedures implemented to make suspensions more rehabilitative in nature were followed as closely as practical limitations would allow. Nevertheless, many roadblocks were experienced. Contact with parents, dialogue with the ISS teacher, interventions by the guidance counsellor, meetings with the school administration and completion of the reflection packages and reflection sheets all met with various levels of resistance. The practice of contacting parents, for example, seems straightforward enough; however, students can be highly inventive in finding ways to limit school-parent contact. Furthermore, many students do not live at home or they have home lives that make meetings with parents impossible.

All the other procedures outlined to encourage student reflection were also difficult to maintain consistently. A dialogue with the suspension teacher regarding the reflection packages, for example, was carried out inconsistently for a number of reasons: a lack of privacy in the ISS room, limited time due to the busy nature of the ISS program, or simply lack of cooperation from the student. Interventions by the guidance counsellors were similarly limited when students

refused to enter into meaningful dialogue about the reasons why they were suspended or how they would avoid suspensions in the future. Further, the counsellors were often required for more urgent matters and found their own cooperation limited by time constraints. As well, meaningful reflection on the part of the suspended students was difficult to achieve with some students who refused to put much effort into the reflection packages. The completion of these assignments sometimes became a battle as well, defeating the purpose of the work. On the whole, since the shorter ISS reflection sheets seemed to be more successful in encouraging reflection than the lengthier packages, they were used more often than originally conceived. The extent to which the ISS program was actually successful in making students more reflective about the reasons for their suspensions, and the impact of this reflection are discussed in the next section.

CONCLUSIONS – PERSONAL GOALS

As indicated earlier, statistical comparisons of the number of students suspended in the years when the ISS program focus was not rehabilitative to the following years when the program made efforts to encourage student reflection and problem-solving to avoid future suspensions reveal no significant differences in suspension rates. This finding may relate to the difficulties of complex data collection in a dynamic school environment where it is difficult to control all the variables that might influence suspension rates. It may also relate to the day-to-day difficulty of consistently carrying out the procedures developed to encourage reflection and thereby make the suspension a more meaningful disciplinary experience. Further studies with tighter controls are necessary.

Despite the disappointing lack of quantitative support from reduced suspension rates, qualitative measures do indicate that the reflective focus of the ISS program succeeded with some individual students. Student interviews demonstrated that progress was made with most students in terms of encouraging reflection and subsequent changes in behaviour choices. This progress required various levels of intervention by the ISS program, depending on the nature of the student.

The key to understanding why the reflective focus is more immediately helpful to some students than others is a basic assumption underlying the secondary goal of the program. We assumed that students' reflections on the reasons for their suspension would be adequate to get to the heart of why they were misbehaving. We further assumed that students, working from this increased understanding, would reduce their misbehaviour. The fundamental flaw in this train of thought is the assumption that all students will change their misbehaviour if only they can be made to understand it and how it affects them and the school climate. This assumption was not accurate. Some students did not want to change their behaviour; rather, they wanted to be different and identified themselves as deviant. A further assumption was that all students could benefit from the reflective focus of an ISS program within a similar time frame. This, too, was erroneous.

After careful consideration, it is clear that to really effect personal change requires more than getting someone to think. Helping someone to understand why something is important and worthy of behaviour or attitude changes is fairly superficial. What is required, more difficult to achieve, and longer lasting in its effect is to affect someone on an emotional level as well as a cognitive level. The successes achieved through positive discipline came as a result of these emotional

changes, which required varying levels of teacher-student contact, depending on the student's attitude toward school and school rules.

Student interviews explored the hypothesis that subsets of the student population responded to the reflective elements of the ISS program differently. It seems that for some students, the reasons why the suspensions were earned (e.g., peer pressure, an inability or unwillingness to change) outweighed the consequences of being suspended (e.g., isolation from their peers, notification of parents and teachers about their misbehaviour). Other students, however, responded more positively to in-school suspensions, using the time suspended to catch up on school work and really make the best of the situation so that they could return to class with minimal disruption. Our observations revealed similarities in student responses to suspensions that may be divided into three categories. We refer to these categories of students as the *yes*, *maybe* and *no* groups.

The students who fall into the *yes* group are not likely to be suspended often. They are the students who make mistakes occasionally, are horrified when they are caught and whose parents will follow up at home. These students are rarely in trouble, and when caught, they say, "Yes, I will follow the rules." The procedures in the ISS room, such as filling out reflection sheets and discussing them with the ISS teacher and/or guidance counsellor, are probably not necessary to ensure that this type of student does not return to the ISS room. The student's own character and/or parental influence will see to that. The reflection sheets and packages act to reinforce the problem-solving and values clarification that come naturally to these students. The suspension and the procedures in suspension have an immediate emotional impact on the student who will make the required changes to avoid being suspended again.

The *maybe* students are altogether different. They are the rule testers, the self-admitted players of the game. They are the students who can tell you exactly how often they can push the school rules before the vice-principal calls their parents. As students, these adolescents constantly challenge the system, trying to get the most personal freedom within the constraints of the school rules. *Maybe* they will follow the rules, *maybe not* – it depends on whether breaking the rule is worth the risk and consequence of being caught. Suspensions do not have an adverse emotional affect on these students because they may not mind suspensions as a consequence. In their view, whether or not to follow the rules is one of the choices they get to make.

Morrish (1998) attributes this kind of adolescent thinking to a parenting style earlier in life. He states parents must condition young children to feel that on some matters they have no choices, only limits, so that their future behaviour is conditioned for appropriate responses. If these limits are not set early in life, he warns that it will be difficult to expect these children to comply with rules later. Without the teaching of compliance and the social values associated with following the rules, these students will make choices based on what they consider to be in their best interest at the time.

Does the reflective focus of the ISS program help the *maybe* students not to repeat misbehaviour? Yes, with effort and an emphasis on values, personal meaning and emotional connections with school. Values clarification and problem-solving may help these students to see the complex landscape of consequences for their actions, in both the short and long term. As a result, they may change their behaviour. Maturity helps, too. Some students simply outgrow the rule testing that resulted in their suspensions.

The final group of students consists of those adolescents who have the greatest need for positive discipline and are the hardest to reach. They are the students who say *no* to school. They say *no* to school rules, *no* to extra-curricular activities and *no* to regular attendance. They struggle in school, typically have low grades, and may be in special education classes. They are at risk students who have difficulty in school academically, socially and behaviourally. They are also the students in most need of help and they must be convinced to take it. Classroom teachers have described this population of students as the 20 percent of a class that takes up 80 percent of teacher time. The proportional attendance of these students in ISS is similarly skewed. These students do not respond to simple interventions. Reflection sheets and reflection packages that clarify values and encourage problem-solving are not sufficient to change their behaviour. Neither is contact with their parents. Neither is intermittent counselling concurrent with suspensions. These students need a number of intervention strategies that are rooted in acceptance and a personal connection with school.

The ISS program is sometimes the most positive link that these students have to school. In the ISS environment they receive one-to-one attention; they are respected, talked to, supported, helped with assignments and encouraged to do better. True discipline, with its focus on rehabilitation, keeps these students in school through an emotional connection with ISS or counselling staff and it provides the students with one more step which they can use to turn themselves around. The rehabilitative nature of the ISS program provides an avenue for connecting emotionally with these students in order to make their behaviour and attitudes more conducive to success in school. The reflection sheets, reflection packages and dialogue by themselves do not account for the success the ISS program has with these students. However, they provide the avenue for making the connection required for genuine discipline.

Given the differences between these three groups of students and the importance of reaching students on emotional and/or motivational levels in order to affect change, how important are the procedures of the ISS program, which were designed to get at the cause of the misbehaviour? The reflection sheets, reflection packages and dialogue with the ISS teacher help to reach the student on cognitive and emotional/motivational levels. The true strength of the program, however, may be in supporting students and connecting with them on an emotional level since that is how personal change is achieved. The procedures implemented to make the program a genuinely positive disciplinary alternative are means to a more successful approach.

Summary

The ISS program was initially developed simply as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions. Its primary focus was to keep students in school and up-to-date with their schoolwork. These and other school related goals were developed and have been achieved, despite day-to-day roadblocks, including the timely assignment of work for suspended students, the difficulty of providing meaningful work for students enrolled in skills-based courses, the challenge of consistent and timely communication with all parents (or guardians) of suspended students, and meaningful dialogue with staff in a busy school. In addition, philosophical differences among staff challenge the role of the ISS program as a part of the school's disciplinary plan.

In addition to the school-based goals of the ISS program, a secondary goal was developed to make the students' suspension experience a genuinely positive learning opportunity, one focussed on discipline, not punishment. Suspensions were restructured to address the needs of suspended students by examining why they misbehaved. Further, the ISS program underwent a number of procedural changes to become more rehabilitative. The changes included more dialogue with students, referrals to counsellors, greater involvement of parents and individualized interventions if negative behaviour continued. The success of the intervention was to be measured by a reduced recidivism rate and lower number of referrals to suspension.

A number of challenges hindered the consistent application of procedures designed for this secondary program goal. Roadblocks included lack of time and privacy for meaningful dialogue between students and the ISS teachers, insufficient time for guidance counsellors' intervention given other urgent student needs, limited improvement in parent involvement and difficulty in implementing reporting procedures to make meaningful statistical comparisons.

Despite the lack of statistical validation for the program, student interviews indicated that most students did reflect on the reasons for their suspensions and made a plan to avoid suspensions in the future. Students who were emotionally affected by suspensions seemed to be the ones who were most likely not to return. At risk students, who have the highest frequency of suspensions, similarly made changes to their behaviour and eventually tried to avoid suspension. However, these students require a greater level of intervention from the program and take more time.

The ISS program is clearly effective in meeting its primary school-based goals and is making progress with its secondary goal, which is student focussed and therefore more dependent on the individual nature of students. Student interviews verify the professionals' observation that efforts to make the ISS program a more genuinely positive disciplinary experience are successful since students do reflect on the reasons for their suspensions. Changes to behaviour as a result of these reflections is immediate for some students, and takes more time with others. It is possible that changes in behaviour will occur for some students only after an emotional connection is made with the school though the efforts of the ISS program.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been compiled from the suggestions made by ISS and classroom teachers, students and the literature. The interested reader is referred to MacWilliams (1992), Sullivan (1989) and Ferrone and Piraino (1990) for further reading.

Given below is a list of recommendations to help overcome roadblocks commonly experienced in the **day-to-day operations** of an in-school suspension program:

- Administrative leadership is necessary to create a staff focus on discipline rather than punishment.
- The school staff needs to regularly (yearly) review the goals and procedures of the school's in- and out-of-school suspension programs.
- A staff discussion on prevention of misbehaviours should take place BEFORE, DURING and AFTER suspensions occur.
- Teachers need to make it a priority to treat suspensions as a learning opportunity if students are to learn from them; the provision of meaningful student work in a timely manner and follow-up discussions with suspended students are necessary.
- The ISS teachers must communicate with staff openly and efficiently.

The following suggestions are offered as **possible improvements to existing in-school suspension programs**:

- Start the day with silent reading, preferably using materials from a library in the room.
- Have students sign the ISS rules when they are suspended.
- Use basic skills packages that are challenging and fun.
- Schedule the day so there is no common lunch with peers and there are different start and dismissal times; this limits socializing with peers and emphasizes the consequence of misbehaviour.
- Provide parents with a copy of an ISS letter of suspension.
- Have students keep their own record of suspension.
- Record suspensions on report cards.
- Have parents sign reflection packages.
- Send a copy of the exit plan (to avoid future suspensions) to parents.
- Have a follow-up with the student and parents to review the plan made by the student to avoid future suspensions.
- Make the messages in the ISS room positive.
- Recruit interested and qualified staff, who have:
 - experience or background in special education, counselling or working with at risk youth;

- an ability to relate to students in a respectful and empathetic manner;
- strong classroom management skills and the ability to create a positive learning environment; and
- strong administrative skills.

The suggestions below are made with a view to **improving similar program evaluations in the future:**

- Keep standardized reporting procedures and monitor/review them frequently.
- Consider having only one person responsible for record keeping.
- Measure more than total suspensions and recidivism rates.
- Consider other things the program might reasonably affect, such as dropout rates, student attendance, attitudes and achievement.
- Measure teacher satisfaction with the program and solicit suggestions for program improvements, both in day-to-day procedures and philosophic direction.
- Survey and/or interview parents and students to gather their views of the program and their suggestions for improvement.

References

- Black, S. (1999). Locked out: why suspension and expulsion should be your court of last resort. *The American School Board Journal*, 34(1), 34-37.
- Downing, H. & Keaster, R. (1998). Involving the community in in-school suspension. *Middle School Journal*, 30(1), 40-44.
- Ferrone, D. & Piraino, N. (1990). Suspension with a plus. *The Canadian School Executive*, 90(9), 15-17.
- MacWilliams, C. (1992). *Positive Measures*. Richmond Hill: Summit Educational Resources.
- Miller, S. (1992). Get an Attitude. *Aviso*, 8(1), 28-29.
- Morrish, R. (1998). *Twelve keys to discipline*. Fonthill: Woodstream Publishing.
- Oppenheimer, J. & Ziegler, S. (1990). Suspension and other approaches to discipline. *The Canadian School Executive*, 9(10), 29-30.
- Raebeck, B. (1993). Beyond the Dunce Cap: Looking for smart alternatives to dumb punishments. *The Executive Educator*, 15(4), 26-28.
- Short, P. & Noblit, G. (1985). Missing the mark in in-school suspension: an explanation and proposal. *NASSP Bulletin*, 69(484), 112-116.
- Sullivan, J. (1989). Elements of a successful in-school suspension program. *NASSP Bulletin*, 73(516), 32-38.

**2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK Canada S7J 2H8
Phone: 306-373-1660
Toll Free: 1-800-667-7762
Fax: 306-374-1122
E-mail: mcdowell@stf.sk.ca**

www.stf.sk.ca/mcdowell