



In-School Suspension – Is It Working?

Roza Gray and Michele Smith

The In-School Suspension program at A. E. Peacock Collegiate in Moose Jaw was conceived as a means of reducing out-of-school suspensions and keeping students up-to-date with their school work. While these goals were met, it became apparent that many of the same students were showing up in the ISS program over and over again. A group of teachers in the school became convinced that to be a truly successful disciplinary alternative, the program needed a more rehabilitative focus. They developed a remedial approach to in-school suspensions that was designed to treat the underlying causes of student misbehaviour and reduce the likelihood of recurrence.

After three years, the success of the modified ISS program was reviewed in relationship to its primary goals at the school level and its secondary goals at the personal level:

Primary Goals – School Level

The ISS program was intended to provide an alternative to out-of-school suspensions, an additional means of keeping students accountable for their behaviour, a supportive environment that enabled students to complete assignments, and a structured means of communicating with parents. All these goals were met to varying degrees in the day-to-day operation of the program. In addition, the teachers in the ISS room became responsible for coordinating out-of-school suspensions, recording all suspensions data, verifying un-excused

absences, supervising exams, helping students to catch up on school work after lengthy absences and providing a room for time-outs.

Two roadblocks were recognized as the ISS program carried out its multiple functions at the school level:

1. It was important that the school work assigned to suspended students was meaningful and current, and it was important that communications with parents occurred in a timely fashion. All administrative and teaching staff had to be committed to the program and diligent in ensuring assignments and communications were carried out effectively.
2. The place of the ISS in the school's discipline policy needed to be understood and accepted by all staff, particularly with respect to the difference between discipline and punishment. Ongoing dialogue was needed to bridge varied views on discipline within the staff.

Secondary Goals – Personal Level

As it evolved into a genuinely positive disciplinary alternative, the ISS program began to focus on changes in student behaviour at the personal level. It was recognized that in-school suspensions needed to address the reasons why students were suspended and, therefore, a reflective program was introduced in every suspension. Students were asked to think about

their misbehaviour and develop a plan to avoid further suspensions.

It was expected that the opportunity to reflect and plan would result in a reduction in the overall number of suspensions. However, the results over a three-year period were disappointing. No statistical differences emerged in the overall return rates of students to the in-school suspension room. Furthermore, there were no significant differences when the rates were broken down according to in- and out-of-school suspensions, reasons for suspension, length of suspension, gender of the students, or the frequency with which students were suspended. It was concluded that difficulties in carrying out the reflective component of the ISS program consistently and problems encountered in collecting data in a dynamic school environment may have affected the statistical results of the study.

The qualitative data were more encouraging. Interviews with suspended students indicated that most of them had made some progress in terms of reflecting on their behaviour and, as a result, making some changes in their behaviour choices. It was clear that varying levels of intervention were involved in assisting students to make behaviour changes, and the time lines for making any noticeable change also varied according to the student. Typically, students considered to be “at risk” were suspended more often, required more interventions, and needed more time to change their behaviour. These differences could be attributed to the importance of reaching students at an emotional level before working towards changes in behaviour.

Recommendations

Having examined the effectiveness of in-school suspensions and the techniques used to achieve program goals, the researchers developed a list of recommendations for overcoming roadblocks in the implementation of an ISS program, as well as suggestions for improving existing ISS programs and tips for evaluating this kind of program.

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”