Why School Suspensions Don’t Work

I never had a student change his behavior for the better because he was suspended. Most of the time students returned and reoffended. Time away from school seemed to exacerbate problems, not fix them.

As a public school leader, I was in charge of major disciplinary actions — suspensions and expulsions. My school was for older, disconnected youth, some with violent and criminal backgrounds. We had to suspend students for all types of reasons: theft, fighting, threatening, bringing a weapon to school.

Even in a school run by social workers, our commitment to helping students was handicapped by some pretty arbitrary discipline rules. Our school board set and approved disciplinary policies, which were developed in partnership with our school leadership team, under the advisement of our lawyer. We all understood there were precedents to follow.

When we started, our discipline committee pored over policies from every area school district. Our lawyers told us to stay consistent with others. It would protect our school. I got it: Can you imagine what a judge and jury would think if we were a zero-suspension school, and a student with a history of violent behavior injured or killed a student or staff member?

So we set policies that mirrored those who had gone before us. Depending on the infraction, students could be suspended for one to three days or 11 to 180 days. If suspended, a student was given a bus ticket and a performance improvement plan. Requirements for her return were put in place. I am glad to say, those requirements often included supports and therapeutic interventions. But while a student was gone, she was provided with very little beyond schoolwork.

Thinking back, I know we set students up to fail. We followed precedents and protocol. We understood suspensions did not work, but when someone did something really risky or scary, removal was more appealing than restoration.

As a system, we induced a cycle of problem behavior. Students would act out, get sent home, be suspended, then return to school some number of days later. Now behind in their work, and embarrassed (or proud) of their absence, they would be more easily agitated and more likely to act out again. Quite a few of our students would spend their time away engaging in the same kinds of behavior, which could include running the streets, staying up late, drinking or doing drugs. They would come back in rough shape — hungry, hungover and tired.

As a leader, I allowed our school to use time as proxy for progress when it came to all major disciplinary situations. Some random number of days, first decided by some school district somewhere, was supposed to resolve whatever caused the suspension in the first place.

Time is not a cure-all for a young person’s problem behavior. Suspensions are easy to administer, monitor and track. Time-based policies are clean and can be uniform across settings and systems. A 10-day suspension looks the same and happens for the same reasons at my school and yours. We know when three or five or 10 days is up. We know when we should expect an instant change in behavior.

The problem is, it does not work. In the case of our school-based discipline, time was a poor proxy for progress, because students simply did not progress toward anything beneficial during their time away. And typically, the more time away the worse the results.

Time plays proxy for progress in many ways across youth systems. Juvenile judges issue timebased sentences: a certain number of days in a detention center or hours of community service. Educators follow seat-time credentialing requirements: a certain number of minutes of instruction to earn a unit of credit. Prevention programs set limits on the number of days or weeks a young person can be in a substance abuse treatment facility. Shelters and transitional living programs, often tied to public dollars, max out after a few weeks or months.

We all need to thoughtfully examine the efficacy of the time-based measures our youth systems rely on. Ask yourself, when and how does this measure lead a young person to move ahead, improve, grow and develop? Is there another way? A better way?

Knowing what I know now, I would have done more, much more, to find alternatives to suspension. I would have demanded our discipline practices kept all youth — including those who got in trouble — in the center.

It is time to set new precedents, to level the scales and bring progress-based measures up to the same level as our time-based ones. Each of us must come up with reasonable and scalable alternatives. If not, we will continue to have many young people biding their time — in school, out of school, in programs, out of programs — waiting to progress, waiting to finish. But in the wait, we will lose them.