In-School Suspension: A Learning Tool

While educators agree that keeping suspended students in school is better than having them home unsupervised, schools need more than a room and a teacher for in-school suspension to change behavior. Structured programs that address multiple issues can help students get back to class faster and stay there. Included: Tips for creating successful in-school suspension programs. As schools strive to keep more students in school, even disruptive ones, in-school suspension programs are seeing more students. But there is a big difference between having an in-school suspension program and having an effective one, educators and researchers said.

"The big plus of an in-school suspension program is that students are still in school, with all the potential for engaging them," said Anne Wheelock, a research associate with the Progress Through the Education Pipeline Project at Boston College's Lynch School of Education. "Suspending students out of school means schools pass up the 'teachable moment' when they can connect with students, build relationships, and communicate that they belong in school.

"Having said that, in-school suspension programs can be little more than window-dressing designed to pull down out-of-school suspension numbers," Wheelock continued. "Poorly conceived and inadequately staffed programs, even though they are better than out-of-school suspensions, may be little more than holding tanks -- just a pro-forma stop on the route to out-of-school suspension or exclusion."

DISCIPLINE, NOT PUNISHMENT

The unappealing idea of students serving out-of-school suspensions roaming their communities during the day, possibly getting into more trouble, prompted some schools to create or expand their in-school suspension programs. In Louisiana, state officials became so concerned about suspended students missing instructional time that the legislature began funding in-school suspension programs. The Kentucky Department of Education encourages school districts to develop policies that include well-rounded academic offerings for those students who stay in school during suspension. The most effective in-school suspension programs have components to address students' academic and social needs, educators said, since frequently, suspended students have both academic and behavioral problems. At the same time, in-school suspension often remains the final step before out of school suspension.

To be an effective learning tool, in-school suspension programs "should be one part of a school-wide strategy for creating and sustaining a positive, nurturing school climate, based on respectful relationships between teachers and students, teachers and teachers, students and students," Wheelock said. "Such a strategy would acknowledge that conflicts of all kinds occur in schools and should be based on a thoughtful set of approaches to resolving conflict and solving problems."

According to Wheelock, characteristics of good ISS programs include:

Ways to ensure in-school suspension is appropriate; in-school suspension is unlikely to resolve a truancy or homework completion problem that should be resolved through other means.

A term limit; students should not be suspended indefinitely.

Problem-solving and/or mediation (including peer mediation) sessions among teachers and students or students and students, which result in written contracts that spell out future expectations.

Ensuring students come to the program with academic assignments to complete.

Professionals to staff the program, such as a teacher who can assess students for unidentified learning difficulties, assist in assignment completion, and by a counselor who can explore root causes of problems, refer students to community services, and engage with parents.

A MODEL HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM

One high school with an in-school suspension program that has been gaining national attention is A.Crawford Mosley High School in Lynne Haven, Florida. The program, called Positive Alternative to School Suspension (PASS) operates as its own class, with explicit requirements and expectations, developed on the job by teacher Jim Lawson.

Building a Solid In-School Suspension Program

Jim Lawson, the in-school suspension teacher for 15 years in the Bay District Schools, Lynne Haven, Florida, told Education World these elements are critical for an effective in-school suspension program:

Preparation. Students and teachers need books and materials, and the teacher needs strategies to keep the students on task.

Orientation. Make sure the rules, benefits, and consequences of the program are clearly communicated. Lawson said he spends about 20 minutes with each new student.

Implementation. Make sure students do their work, the teacher keeps accurate records, and the teacher is fair and consistent.

Assessment. Every program should have a method for assessing students.

Most programs are missing an assessment program, according to Lawson. "Take away any two [of the four] and the program won't work," he said.

"Fifteen years ago, the district gave me a title and a room; I became the in-school suspension teacher for all of the high schools," Lawson told Education World. "I learned everything through trial and error. Now I have a model I follow, and I want to reach people who need help -- who have ISS programs that don't work."

Lawson, who now is responsible for just one high school program, lectures at national educators' conferences, and hosts about 20 people annually who come to observe the program. His approach is working; last year, only 67 out of 467 students did not complete the in-school suspension program and were assigned to out of school suspension, Lawson said.

"The program is designed so students can work themselves out of a little bit of trouble and keep their grades up," said Lawson, a former psychology teacher and coach. "I look at it as my classroom. I call it 'graduation' when they leave. Students can choose in-school suspension over out-of-school suspension, and are assigned to in-school suspension for three, five, or ten days, where they work on assignments from their classes. All students start their suspension with an orientation. Lawson explains the expectations and rules of the program; students are graded daily in five areas based on a rubric. "The rubric also helps parents understand why their child is in trouble," Lawson said. "The orientation removes all the 'I didn't knows' from student excuses. Students are immediately responsible for their success or failure."

Areas in which students are graded include attendance, tardiness, ability to follow all rules, behavior, and work habits in class. Students receive a point for each violation in each category. If they accumulate five points, they are transferred to out-of-school suspension. If that happens, the highest grade they can receive for assignments they completed while assigned to in-school suspension is 60 (D).

While there is no formal counseling component in the high school ISS program, as there is in the middle school, Lawson said he often talks with students about why they were suspended and introduces strategies to prevent them from being suspended again. "I point out that if they were suspended for being tardy, and they haven't been tardy to suspension, that shows they can get to school on time."