

Suspending belief:

Suspending students leads to other problems.

Sheryl Hemphill, April 27, 2009

ALTHOUGH school suspensions are an outdated and counterproductive mode of student discipline, they are surprisingly common. In 2007, 12 per cent of year 10 students in Victoria reported having been suspended at least once.

One of the most controversial and emotive issues facing schools is the effective management of violent, anti-social and disruptive student behaviour. The response is often framed as a choice between the interests of the suspended student and those of other students and staff at the school. The interests of the latter are often given priority. It may seem paradoxical but the evidence is clear: school suspensions increase the risk of a number of adverse consequences for the student. These include worsening academic problems, school drop-out, disengagement from school, student alienation, crime and delinquency, and alcohol and drug use.

Our research of 4000 year 7 and 9 students from Victoria and Washington State, in the US, found that being suspended from school increased by 50 per cent the likelihood of students engaging in anti-social behaviour 12 months later. This effect was beyond other important influencing factors.

This is not to say that other factors (such as family conflict, social and economic disadvantage or hanging around with friends who get into trouble) do not influence student behaviour. But even when we considered these other influences, school suspensions had a detrimental effect.

We might expect a strong link between student behaviour and whether or not the student is suspended. However, the use of school suspensions is also related to other characteristics of the student and the school. Of particular concern is that students excluded from school are often socially and economically disadvantaged and belong to minority groups. For example, indigenous students are more likely than students from other cultures to be excluded.

An unintended consequence of school suspensions is that, for some students, being suspended is rewarding. A student who does not like attending school, or is finding school difficult, may view a suspension as a reason to have a day off school. In this situation, the problematic behaviour risks being reinforced.

Suspension also provides students with opportunities to link up with other young people who get into trouble, particularly if they are not supervised, are bored and lack recreational opportunities. School suspensions also affect the wider community. Where students gather out of school, feelings of insecurity can strike other community members. Paradoxically, students and staff report a lower sense of security and poorer results in schools that make frequent use of suspensions.

What alternatives are there for schools when students transgress?

First, minimise the use of suspensions (and expulsions). They should only be used as a last resort and reserved for the most severe behavioural transgressions when the physical safety of others is threatened.

There are alternatives to suspensions. For example, programs that teach students social and interpersonal and anger management skills have been shown to prevent problem behaviour.

Another approach is the use of restorative practices. This focuses on maintaining relationships and undoing the harm, such as through giving an apology or repairing damaged property.

In-school suspensions remove the student from the classroom to another location in the school to complete school work. Their use overcomes many of the problems associated with excluding students from school.

Finally, little time is spent in teacher training on effective ways to handle problem behaviour. Teachers need to be well trained in behaviour management approaches so they can implement them with confidence in their classrooms. While there are postgraduate courses to assist teachers in this area, undergraduate training is equally important but too often lacking.

When suspensions are used, schools need to follow a number of steps. They need to communicate openly with students and their parents about the behaviour concerned, and encourage families to make arrangements to ensure that students will be supervised by an adult while on suspension.

They also need to explore whether other problems such as learning disabilities or family breakdown underlie the behaviour and need to be addressed.

Students should be given school work to complete while on suspension and there should be a process for reintegrating them into school after the suspension is completed. Developing alternatives to suspensions takes effort, but the likely benefits for students, principals, teachers and the community are well worth it.

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<http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/suspending-belief-20090426-ajau.html?page=-1>