

Children's Needs III:

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School Disciplinary Systems: Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion

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Without question, schools need sound disciplinary systems to maintain school safety and promote student learning. In the face of multiple-victim homicides in the late 1990s, schools have been increasingly motivated to address issues of disruption and violence. The fear created by such incidents also has generated support for more punitive methods of school discipline, often under the broad rhetoric of *zero tolerance*. The shift toward punitive and exclusionary discipline has substantially increased the number of students suspended or expelled from school (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Thus, schools face what appears to be a profound dilemma. To fulfill their responsibility to promote safety, many schools and school districts have turned to procedures that remove some children from the opportunity to learn. Under federal education legislation, schools are under a mandate to use "only practices that are evidence-based, so only the best ideas with proven results are introduced into the classroom" (No Child Left Behind Act Fact Sheet, 2001). The purpose of this chapter is to examine what is known about the use of school exclusion as a disciplinary strategy. Are zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion effective methods for promoting safe and effective school climates? Are there effective alternatives that can keep schools safe without removing students from the opportunity to learn?

BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

Purposes of School Discipline

Although in the public mind school discipline has become increasingly associated with the use of punishment and school exclusion (Skiba & Peterson, 1999), in fact a number of important instructional and organizational purposes underlie any school's disciplinary system:

- *To ensure the safety of students and teachers.* The increased awareness that deadly violence brought to this nation has drawn attention to the acute need to guarantee the safety of students and teachers.
- *To create a climate conducive to learning.* Effective disciplinary systems should improve academic outcomes by increasing the amount and quality of time teachers can spend teaching rather than responding to behavioral disruptions.
- *To teach students skills needed for successful interaction in school and society.* Children will always require socialization, instruction, and correction to shape fundamentally egocentric behavior into interpersonal skills that make children capable of interacting successfully with others in school and beyond.
- *To reduce rates of future misbehavior.* Behavioral psychology (Skinner, 1953) suggests that those