EDUCATION

Does Suspending Students Work?

New research shows that sending kids home from school as punishment may do more harm than good

By Christopher J. Ferguson | Dec. 05, 2012

Every now and again we hear stories about a kid getting suspended from school for some absurdly minor infraction. In October, four teenage boys in Pekin, Illinois, were suspended for two days for eating energy mints in the cafeteria. Last year, there was a rash of suspensions of students for hugging, and examples of cases involving dress codes such as haircuts or t-shirts are too many to list. Although the misdeeds are very small, the incidents raise a bigger issue: does suspending a kid from school work? In other words, does it actually ameliorate behavioral and academic problems?

Increasingly, the answer seems to be no. In fact, suspensions may do more harm than good. As Pamela Fenning and her colleagues noted in the April 2012 Journal of School Violence, most school districts continue to use out-of-school suspensions even for minor disciplinary issues even though they tend to actually exacerbate problem behaviors and also may lead to academic problems. Further, out-of-school suspensions are not rewarded by being excused from school and won’t miss out on schoolwork.

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Reasons why out-of-school suspensions don’t work are fairly obvious. Giving students what amounts to a free day or two off doesn’t actually feel like punishment for most kids, especially those who may already be hostile towards school to begin with. But if the student then misses school work, his or her grades will decline, further increasing the student’s detachment from the academic environment. Out-of-school suspensions leave kids at home unsupervised and able to cause more problems. And they also do nothing to teach appropriate alternative behavior nor address underlying issues that may be causing the bad behavior.

In fairness, schools often struggle to find alternatives for kids whose discipline problems are truly serious and who may disrupt the learning environment for other students. I’ve worked clinically with enough kids to understand that, although they are a tiny minority, some can be so disruptive that the interventions teachers have at hand will have little impact. Unfortunately, we don’t yet have any empirically-validated alternatives. Some schools have implemented either in-school suspension or Saturday suspension (effectively a Saturday detention) so that students may disrupt the learning environment for other students. I’ve worked clinically with enough kids to understand that, although they are a tiny minority, some can be so disruptive that the interventions teachers have at hand will have little impact. Unfortunately, we don’t yet have any empirically-validated alternatives. Some schools have implemented either in-school suspension or Saturday suspension (effectively a Saturday detention) so that students

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As always, school districts may struggle to find the financial resources to provide services for students at highest risk. In the absence of those resources, it’s understandably tempting to want to eject some students to preserve the educational opportunities for others. However, that simply kicks the societal cost down the road. Academic failure is a significant predictor of later occupational and legal problems as an adult. Figuring out how to appropriately discipline students at highest risk for academic failure should be a part of discussion about educational reform. Otherwise we risk leaving behind the most vulnerable of our citizens.

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