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ABSTRACT

A 1995 Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE) report investigated violence among students and the frequency of and basis for suspensions and expulsions among the state's student population. This paper presents findings of a study that examined educational stakeholders' perceptions of school suspension, expulsion, and violence in Kansas schools. Interviews were conducted with a total of 34 participants in 5 separate focus groups in 3 different Kansas cities. Each group consisted of secondary-level building administrators, directors of special education, parents, special-education staff, school psychologists, and community members. In general, the discussions confirmed KSBE's previous research findings. Although some of the participants were reluctant to admit that expulsion- and suspension-related problems existed, they agreed that students' misbehaviors were increasing. Students in special education were disproportionately represented in the number of students suspended or expelled. In addition, participants questioned the efficacy of suspension and expulsion practices. In a few schools, suspensions were a basis for initiating alternative educational services and placements. Nonviolent behaviors (that is, smoking, disobedience, and verbal threats) recurred more frequently than violent behavior and had profound effects. Violent acts were committed by a small segment of the student population that had a history of school-related problems, and occurred regardless of school district size or location. Finally, focusing only on violent acts fails to consider other safety and school-climate issues. A systemswide approach involving diverse stakeholders is needed to positively address these related problems. (Contains 1 table and 32 references.) (LMI)

VOICES ABOUT SCHOOL SUSPENSION, EXPULSION, AND SAFETY

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VOICES ABOUT SCHOOL SUSPENSION, EXPULSION, AND VIOLENCE

Part 1: Summary

Two studies (Cooley, 1995; Penrod, 1994) completed for the Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE) have provided important information about violence among students and the frequency of and basis for suspensions and expulsions in the school population. To further study these issues, this project was initiated. The project's activities included two rounds of discussion groups to elicit participants' perspectives on school suspension, expulsion, and violence. Each group included secondary level building administrators, directors of special education, parents, special education certified high school instructional staff, school psychologists, and community members. The 34 participants shared personal stories, discussed school problems, and suggested possible remedies.

In general, these discussions confirmed KSBE's previous research findings. Although some of the participants were reluctant to admit that problems exist related to suspension and expulsion, they did agree that students' misbehaviors are increasing. Our impression was that many of the school professionals felt uncomfortable about this increase and its ripple effects on related issues. For example, these issues consume energy that could otherwise be available for other valuable educational resources. In addition, the outstanding accomplishments of students who do not present behavioral problems are often obscured or reduced in the public's perception. The following brief statements provide summaries of the discussions.

- Students in special education are disproportionately represented in the number of students suspended or expelled.
- The efficacy of suspension and expulsion practices is questionable.
- In a few schools, suspensions are a basis for initiating alternative educational services and placements.
- Although violent behavior is serious, other misbehaviors occur with much greater frequency and are more likely to result in suspensions or expulsions. The effects of non-violent behavior are profound, and their unsettling frequency suggests they are too widespread and deeply ingrained for our school system to address on its own.

- Violent acts are committed by a small segment of the student population that has had a history of school related problems.
- Violent acts are increasing in frequency and involve a wider age range and increasingly larger segments of the student population.
- Violent acts occur regardless of a school district's size or location.
- Though violent acts are infrequent, they involve complex issues for students, schools, and communities.
- While violent acts occur infrequently, collectively they pose major challenges for the educational system and society.
- Focusing narrowly on *violent* acts does not adequately take into account other safety and school climate issues that plague schools.
- A systems-wide approach involving diverse stakeholders is needed to positively address these related problems.

Parent, community, and school groups are demanding many forms of assistance to deal with problems associated with violence, suspensions, and expulsions. These demands illustrate that these issues cannot be addressed by schools or parents alone. Because multiple contexts (e.g., home, school, community, social services, law enforcement, and judicial agencies) are involved (each with their own goals, procedures, rules, budgets and personnel), a systems perspective is needed. School safety and its counterpart, school violence, cannot be isolated relative to school causations or solutions. Immediate and thoughtful systemic action is needed to develop an effective action plan to ameliorate the problems associated with violence, suspensions, and expulsions.

Part 2: Background, Discussion Group Procedures, and Results

Background

A recent KSBE report (Cooley, 1995) provides good background information for understanding student behaviors that result in suspension and expulsion. Cooley examined 1,094 suspensions/expulsions of regular and special education students in Kansas, and analyzed 1,089 of them. He found that the majority of acts (92%) leading to suspensions/expulsions were what might be considered "traditional offenses" such as disobedience (23%), altercations with other students [fighting, (22%) and assaulting other students, (9%)], and disrespect (13%). Other reasons included smoking, skipping school, and petty thefts. In addition to these "traditional offenses," 5.7% of the incidents involved drugs (37 incidents) or alcohol (25 incidents).

More serious acts such as overt threats to teacher safety, guns in school, and staff assaults, represented a very small part of those acts resulting in disciplinary action in schools. Assaults on teachers made up 2.2 percent (24 incidents) of the incidents and guns 1.8 percent (20 incidents). More detailed information about suspensions and expulsions is listed in Table 1, "Reasons for Suspension/Expulsion" (page 6).

Students with disabilities represent approximately 11% of all students in Kansas. They were significantly over-represented in the number of suspensions/expulsions, being twice as likely to be suspended/expelled as non-disabled students. Even more significant was the fact that students with behavior disorders were eleven times as likely and students with learning disabilities were almost two and a half times as likely to be suspended or expelled as their non-disabled peers.

National Profile

What percentage of students and teachers reported being threatened or injured at school during the previous year?

- In 1991, 40% of 10th grade students reported they were threatened or injured. In 1994, 36% reported that they were threatened or injured.
- In 1991, 10% of the teachers reported that they were threatened or injured. In 1994, 15% reported that they were threatened or injured.

Source: National Education Goals Panel, 1995 National Education Goals Report

To further explore and understand the issues raised by Cooley's study the project described below was initiated. We hope it will be one of many ongoing efforts in the field to communicate about and find solutions to problems that manifest themselves in the schools but reflect and require solutions involving the entire community.

Participants

The locations selected for the focus groups were Lawrence, Dodge City, and Wichita. Five separate focus groups were scheduled across these locations. In Lawrence and Dodge City, morning and afternoon focus groups were scheduled. In Wichita only a morning session was held.

Invitations were extended to 54 nominees by KSBE staff. A total of 34 individuals participated in the discussions. Twenty-four participants attended the first round of discussions. First-round participation was negatively influenced by the extremely cold weather and blizzard-like conditions which occurred in Dodge City and Wichita during the month of January. Twenty-six participants attended the second round. Of these, 16 had also participated in the first round while ten participated in the second round only. In several instances, a person substituted for a KSBE nominee (n = 3) or a nominee brought along an additional staff person (n = 1).

Procedures

Prior to the discussions, participants were mailed information to assist them in preparing their comments. The materials included an agenda and background information about the topics and questions which would guide the discussions. These questions were developed with KSBE staff.

Audio recordings were made of the focus group discussions. These recordings were used to verify the authors' written notes.

Results

The following sections present representative questions which guided the focus groups' discussions. Following each question are summary statements in which we synthesized participants' comments. Although these summaries most likely reflect the majority's comments, we hope that we have represented the diversity of opinions. However, given the wide range of the discussions, we make no guarantees!

Our discussions regarding suspensions, expulsions and violence were intertwined. The content of these topics was not easily separated because they have many related issues. In our reporting we begin with information more closely associated with suspension and expulsion. Following a review of several questions on suspension and expulsion, we

more closely examine how violence, school safety and school climate affect student and school staff behaviors.

We begin with a listing of the reasons students may be suspended or expelled. As outlined in the Kansas statute 72-8901, suspension or expulsion may occur for the following seven reasons:

(a) Willful violation of the district's published, adopted student conduct regulations
(b) Conduct that substantially disrupts, impedes, or interferes with the school operation
(c) Conduct that endangers safety or substantially impinges on or invades rights of others
(d) Conduct that constitutes commission of a felony
(e) Conduct at school, on school property, or at a school supervised activity which constitutes a misdemeanor
(f) Disobedience of an order of a teacher or other school authority if the disobedience can reasonably result in disorder, disruption, or interference with the operation of the school or impinge on the rights of others. (72-8901)
(g) Possession of a weapon at school on school property or at a school sponsored event (72-89a01, 02 and 03).

1. How do you explain the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates for students in special education?

Although most participants agreed with Cooley's 1995 report that students in special education were disproportionately suspended and expelled from school, some participants disagreed. Those who disagreed believed that the "due process" regulations "overprotected" students with disabilities from suspension and expulsion. The "double or dual" set of legal standards (one for students without disabilities and the other for students with disabilities) has created confusion among educators about suspensions and expulsions.

Most everyone agreed that the legal rights and responsibilities afforded to students with disabilities have complicated student-educator interactions. Many participants complained that they "legally have their hands tied" in working with students in special education and are "afraid of lawsuits." As a result, many educators have tended to "back off" in their interactions with students with disabilities, especially with regard to suspension. They expressed the view that students in special education are able to "get away with" more suspendable types of behavior because administrators do not want the legal hassles of trying to remove a special education student from school. Said one participant, "You almost have to be a lawyer to know everything you need to do."

The vast majority of participants agreed that students in special education were disproportionately represented in the number of students suspended or expelled in the state of Kansas. Several explanations, detailed in Table 1, were offered for this fact.

Table 1
Reasons for Suspension/Expulsion

Percentages of Occurrence

Reason	Regular Education Student	Special Education Student	Total
Alcohol	2.58	1.46	2.30
Assaulting Staff	1.72	3.65	2.20
Assaulting Student	7.98	10.58	8.63
Attendance/Tardy	4.66	2.92	4.22
Disobedience	**22.82**	**22.63**	**22.77**
Disrespect	12.36	14.60	13.22
Drugs	3.68	2.55	3.40
Fighting	**23.07**	**17.52**	**21.67**
Gang Activity	0.49	0.00	0.37
Gun	1.72	2.19	1.84
Harassing Students	0.25	0.00	0.18
Inappropriate Objects	1.35	1.09	1.29
Knife	1.47	2.19	1.65
Language	0.49	0.73	0.55
Sexual Harassment	0.74	0.73	0.73
Smoking/tobacco	4.42	5.11	4.59
Theft	4.17	4.38	4.22
Threatening Staff	0.98	2.92	1.47
Threatening Student	0.25	0.36	0.28
Vandalism	1.60	2.55	1.84
Other	2.82	1.82	2.57
Total	**815**	**274**	**1089**
	74.84	25.16	100.00

(a) Behavioral Characteristics of Students in Special Education

Students in special education, particularly those labeled learning disabled (LD) and behavior disabled (BD) have been singled out as having severe disabilities that are chronic, occur across multiple environments, and have proven resistant to interventions. Due to the behavioral characteristics associated with students with LD and/or BD, as a group these students

frequently behave inappropriately. For example, they do not read social cues effectively, have limited social skills, have low self-esteem and self-efficacy, "act out" to get out of class or to attract attention, have difficulty regulating their behavior, and do not process information as well as "regular" students. These problems can lead to misperceptions and misbehaviors. If not managed effectively, they may ultimately lead to suspension.

Definition of Terms

adolescent - hormonally enhanced person

-- H.S. social studies teacher

(b) Curricular Goals

Students served in special education have individual educational plans (IEP). These IEPs include a variety of information including students' long-term curricular goals. These goals are developed by instructional staff, support staff, parents, and sometimes, the student. Because many students in special education, particularly those labeled BD, display inappropriate types of behaviors, IEPs need to address more social skills goals, objectives, and instruction (e.g., conflict resolution, anger control, self-discipline, and interpersonal communication).

One problem confronting the IEP development team, however, concerns the definition of legitimate goals for students. For example, should goals focus on the school's and the state's general core curricula targeting world class standards or on specific disability-related or functional needs of the student? IEPs, particularly those developed for students at the middle and high school levels, tend to focus on "core" academics and basic skills to the exclusion of other spheres of student development, such as social and emotional development. As a consequence, many students in special education are not receiving the help or support they need to succeed in school and beyond. One participant suggested that the school day be lengthened to teach students personal, social, and other life skills. Another posed the question, "Who concerns us more--the person with limited literacy skills or the person with aggressive behaviors and poor impulse control?"

Another problem cited with IEP development was that the power base among the participants is not symmetrical. For example, often IEPs are essentially generated from computer software that routinizes the process and limits individualization. They are then "rubber stamped" during the meeting, with little or no input from the student or parent. Conversely, parents can exercise a very demanding position and dictate the terms of the IEP rather than working for consensus.

(c) Lack of Preparation for Inclusion

Educators have begun to implement an inclusive philosophy of education in their schools. Many of the participants felt, however, that inclusive practices have not been adequately supported with teacher/staff training, instructional adaptations, instructional technology, and other interventions to help insure that students with disabilities are successful. In addition, many participants did not believe that inclusion was necessarily the right approach for every student. In fact, many participants felt that this approach could violate the basic premise of giving each student an opportunity for success.

Another concern expressed was that under an "inclusion" model districts have difficulty supporting the concept and practice of a continuum of services. In fact, a district using a full inclusion model would be opposed to a continuum of services. Additional assistance is needed to support inclusive practices, including increased staff development, transition services, and other extra-school assistance from agencies that have been peripheral to educational planning yet nevertheless make educational decisions (such as SRS and the courts).

(d) Lack of Resources

The challenges posed by students with significant needs (such as students with disabilities) combined with a lack of resources to address these challenges has increased the number and frequency of suspensions and expulsions. Some participants suggested that the disability itself is frequently not the only factor relevant to behavior problems. Other challenges frequently presented by the student with disabilities include lack of parental support, involvement with other social service agencies, repeated school failures, increased academic expectations, and so forth. These contributing factors make dealing effectively with a student more difficult, particularly when supporting resources and/or services are lacking or limited.

Given this combination of influences, removing or suspending students from school may be seen as a good, albeit short-term,

solution-- or as the only remaining option. Participants also noted that many state institutions (e.g., Larned State Hospital and Topeka State Hospital) are increasingly returning students to their communities, which have fewer resources and available services. Ironically, these students were originally placed in state facilities because of insufficient or nonexistent local resources. Now, the same students are returned to their local communities, which still do not have the resources or services

A Transition Story

Terry came to us from a youth detention facility. He'd been incarcerated for a year and a half and was assigned to a group home in our community. He arrived about three in the afternoon, had his bag in hand, and the best attitude he'd had in all his life.

They shine him up that night and feed him. The next morning they bring him to our high school and say, "Here's Terry and we have to go." We enroll him and so Terry goes to class for hours three, four, five.

I see Terry at the end of the day and he says he doesn't like this. "This is another planet, I can't do this," he says. The next day he comes back, goes to all six classes and goes home that night. It's still another planet to him.

Terry runs away. So group home parents do what they're supposed to do. They call the police because Terry just got out of incarceration. The police pick him up, give him a shower the next morning, and bring him to school at 7:30 in the morning. Terry is still wearing the clothes he had on the night before.

He's back in school, but he stands just inside the front door. I've seen Terry for the third day! I say, "That's nice you're back. You've got the right smile, and the best attitude you've had." "I can't do it," he says.

"OK", I say. "Let me talk to your social worker." I call the social worker in another town, who agrees to drive over.

This is a win-win thing. This kid we can save. But he can't handle the classrooms. So I meet his social worker and current foster care parents in the detention center. "Well," we all say, "You've got to go to school and we're saving you from prison."

Where is Terry today? Incarcerated. Did Terry do anything to be incarcerated? All he did was be truthful and smile.

Safety? Where's Terry's safety? Terry felt safer incarcerated.

— Building level administrator

to help them achieve success. This problem is exacerbated in rural communities, which have even fewer resources and services than larger metropolitan areas (e.g., Colby versus Kansas City, Kansas). In addition, available services are becoming more limited and "diluted" due to budgetary constraints and cutbacks. For example, many comments were made that "Level 4, therapeutic foster care" is now more like a regular foster care setting. In summary, as agencies attempt to "hand off" students and services decrease, the likelihood for suspensions and expulsions increases.

(e) Inappropriate Labeling of Students

Many participants felt that a large number of students in special education, particularly those labeled "behavior disordered," have been inappropriately labeled. Many students labeled "behavior disordered" should not have been classified as disabled at all, but rather should have been considered to have conduct disorders or anti-social behaviors. Students with conduct disorders or anti-social behaviors are the least likely students to be successful in a traditional school setting, and are therefore the ones most likely to be suspended or expelled.

Participants voiced concerns about the category of "behavior disorder" versus the federal category of "serious emotional disturbance." Students fail to qualify for special education services when they have serious mental illness. Those students who have serious emotional disabilities and meet the disability definition are ineffectively serviced in a regular/special educational school setting, because the primary interventions provided are academic and behavioral. The consensus was that these students are in need of a more therapeutic classroom with increased psychological interventions including individual, peer, and family counseling and family supports.

In summary, several participants believed that the double or dual set of legal standards tends to overprotect students in special education so that they are not suspended as often as students in regular education. However, most agreed with the results of the studies conducted by KSBE. They believe that students in special education are disproportionately suspended because of the behavioral characteristics of many students with disabilities, ineffective IEPs, lack of preparation for inclusion, lack of resources, and inappropriate labeling of students.

2. How should the regulations regarding suspended and expelled students in special education be changed?

Participants did not reach consensus regarding how and if the regulations regarding suspended and expelled students in special

education should be changed. Essentially two schools of thought were expressed.

The first school of thought held that the "double or dual" set of legal standards should be eliminated. Several participants pointed out that only the educational system has a dual set of standards or distinctions between students in regular and special education. Once students leave the school environment or become "legal" adults, they are treated the same in the eyes of the law, as a dual set of legal standards is not available and students with disabilities are no longer protected. For example, if two students, one with and one without a disability, commit an offense (i.e., destruction of property) outside the school environment and are caught by the police, they will legally be treated the same regardless of whether one of them has a disability. However, if the same two students commit the same offense in school, they will be treated differently.

Adherents of the first school of thought saw the application of a dual set of standards as ineffective in helping students, particularly those with disabilities, to be successful after leaving K-12 education. Some made the point that the double or dual set of legal standards is also difficult and confusing for educators to manage, sends the "wrong message" to others (i.e., "If I am labeled special ed, then I get away with..."), overprotects students with disabilities, creates extra financial and administrative problems, and leads to misunderstandings among all parties involved. As one participant put it, "We should all have the same standards but with many more alternatives to deal with individual differences."

Participants who championed the second school of thought were against the elimination of the double or dual set of legal standards for students with and without disabilities. They believe that in order to protect the rights of students with disabilities, it is critical to maintain the safeguards that the double or dual legal system provides. The legal system allows for individual differences in case law, in that an individual's mental capacity at the time of the misbehavior is an important consideration. In court, a person's mental abilities (such as the ability to judge right from wrong), whether related to a disability or affected by temporary factors such as emotional state or drug influence, are offered as grounds for differential treatment.

Historically, the rights of students with disabilities have been egregiously violated by persons charged with their care, treatment, and education. The double or dual legal system attempts to insure that similar situations are not repeated. Proponents of the second school of thought fear that if the "double or dual" legal system is eliminated, history will repeat itself and students with disabilities will be disproportionately impacted in even higher numbers by being deprived of the opportunity to receive an appropriate education. Cooley's (1995) report documented that even under the existing standards, students with disabilities are more likely than others to be suspended or expelled.

Even many of those who supported the double or dual system believe that much more training, awareness, and support on how to interpret and follow the regulations is needed. Additional training would result in educators having more knowledge about the "how-to's" of following the regulations. Thus less room for misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and confusion would exist.

In conclusion, during the focus group discussions, two trends emerged regarding how and if the regulations regarding the suspension/expulsion of students in special education should be altered. One trend called for the elimination of a "double or dual" set of legal standards (one for students with disabilities and the other for students without disabilities) and the establishment of one set of legal standards for all students. The other trend called for the continuation of the double or dual set of legal standards but with more training and support for educators on how to interpret and apply these standards.

What might the consequences be for the changes suggested by our participants? Regardless of any changes in the suspension and expulsion process for students with and without disabilities, more training, awareness, and support on how to interpret and apply the regulations are needed. However, if the "dual" set of regulations is eliminated and a single rule is applied, one might expect that the numbers, and thus the percentage of students with disabilities who are suspended or expelled would increase. The available data indicate that students in special education already have a disproportionately higher likelihood of suspension or expulsion. This increase in the number of suspensions and expulsions would have a ripple effect of increased financial costs associated with administrative processing.

Knowing my rights and yours

There's a lot of frustration and confusion about suspension and expulsion of special education students. Students, parents, and school staff think they know, but all of the statements that we have heard could not be true.

--Special education administrator

3. Are definitions of suspension and expulsion uniform across districts and schools within districts?

Suspension and expulsion are defined and utilized differently across and within districts. These differences reflect the uniqueness of the administrative leadership and philosophy, administrative procedures, school setting, student characteristics, school characteristics, available resources, and school mission.

Participants were adamant that most discipline problems do not result in suspension. When suspension is meted out as a punishment, several factors usually are taken into consideration. These factors include: (1) severity of the misbehavior, (2) number of times the misbehavior(s) has occurred (i.e., chronicity of the offenses), (3) intentionality of the misbehavior, (4) cooperation of the student, and (5) impact on other students.

Three uniform characteristics of suspension identified by the participants were: (1) the action is a disciplinary response; (2) the student's normal instructional opportunities are changed, and (3) the action is directed by the building administrator. Characteristics of suspension which are variable across settings are listed in the first column of the following chart. Columns two and three, labeled "Option," include some of the alternative outcomes that a district might follow. For example, the first characteristic is labeled "Consequence." Consequence refers to the school's action for the suspension. The most common option is a removal from school for a designated time period. An alternative to a time period is that the student must complete a task such as write a report or repair damaged property.

Characteristic	Option	Option
(1) Consequence	Removal for designated time interval (e.g., a few hours to five days)	Removal pending task completion
(2) Reporting	No report made	Reports filed with the school district and designated agencies like parole officers
(3) Location	Student is sent home	Student sent to designated classroom, or separate building
(4) Instruction	None provided	Designated teacher provides content area instruction
(5) Purpose	"Cooling off"	Punishment

4. What happens during a suspension?

The traditional "in-school suspension," "out-of-school suspension," and expulsion have many variations. The following variations are illustrative of how districts have adapted the practice.

a. The "cooling off" plan includes informally removing the student from school for a few hours and up to a full day. No paperwork is completed and the plan is agreed to by the parent. This plan is seldom considered a suspension. No instruction or services are provided. The goal is to remove the student from the school situation and to allow calmer feelings to develop or attitudes to improve.

b. The in-school suspension includes suspending the student's normal class routine. The student may have supervision by a staff member and may or may not participate with other students in such activities as lunch, between-class breaks, and dismissal times.

In a related type of in-school suspension, instruction is provided in content areas. The student is restricted to one teacher and a particular building area. This alternative is not considered a change of placement. Instruction might also include behavioral or social skills intervention materials e.g., conflict resolution, anger management, accepting criticism, responding to peer pressure. Another variation, for students with IEPs, is that the instruction is given in a self-contained classroom by an instructor certified in special education.

One high school principal reported that none of his students were given out-of-school suspensions. All suspensions were completed in school, because "out of school suspensions were like a vacation."

c. "Proposed long-term suspension" includes removing the student from school to the home and waiting for the suspension hearing. In at least one district the pre-hearing time interval does not count towards the ten day limit since the student is not considered suspended.

d. Alternative school placement includes having the student attend another setting (e.g., a school district office or separate school). The district might provide financial support for the student's attendance. The placement includes instruction and services.

e Homebound service includes instruction and services provided in the home by a contracted provider or school staff.

f. Out of school suspension includes removing the student from school without instruction. The time interval may wrap around to another school year. In one district, out of school suspensions were given, but the student had to attend school beginning after the other students were dismissed (e.g., 3:30 to 6:30) and on Saturday mornings. This latter example required parents to provide transportation for the student.

g. Expulsion requires that the student be removed from school for a longer time period than is the case with suspension. A variation is whether the student can return to the previous attendance center or instead must attend school in an alternative setting. If the expulsion is due to a weapons violation, the student is out of school for 365 days.

The common view was that suspensions and expulsions exist to address misbehaviors and that in their variations they serve useful functions. However, the permutations listed above make any conclusions on the efficacy of suspensions difficult to reach. Most participants indicated that these interventions had very limited positive influence. Participants agreed that for a few students the action would work (i.e., ameliorate future misbehavior). However, participants differed as to whether or not these interventions would benefit the majority of suspended/expelled students. Some perceived the measures as reinforcements for poor behavior (i.e., opportunities to get out of school work). In particular, they viewed the out-of-school punishment as allowing greater freedom for the individual and doing little to increase student or parental responsibility. Other participants thought that suspensions were important for getting the attention of parents.

5. What are your experiences about why students are suspended or expelled?

1. As mentioned above, most students' misbehaviors do not result in suspension or expulsion, but rather some other disciplinary action. When used, however, student suspensions and/or expulsions accomplish several different goals. The following roles of suspensions and/or expulsions were identified by the participants:

(a) As part of the "continuum of services" provided to a student. A suspension is viewed as a behavioral intervention, and it documents the school's effort to assist a student. The intervention may work, but if not, then school staff have a record of the events leading to the suspension which may be useful in eliciting other, more powerful interventions.

(b) As an alternative to possibly identifying the student as having a disability. That is. a student is suspended or expelled to avoid the referral and comprehensive evaluation for a suspected disability. If the student meets the disability criteria. the student would be treated differently concerning possible suspension or expulsion.

(c) As a means to access or marshal other resources and services (e.g., SRS. probation officers. courts. police). That is. the action might provide an

A Conversation on Suspension

"One of my students was suspended and during that suspension committed a murder. It bothered me that a 15 year old kid was on the street because he was late for school or something for X amount of time..."

"That's a pretty powerful example. In many instances behavior is related back to the lack of family support."

"There was no family."

"So you're sending them back to an environment where there isn't anything."

--- Two group participants

opening for involvement of other agencies or of parents in working with the student. One administrator expressed the opinion that more suspensions should occur for more students so that parents would be forced to become more involved with students and the school. His perception was that teachers are asked to tolerate too much from students with little parental support.

(d) As a means of punishment or consequence for misbehavior.

(e) As the "last resort" or the only alternative available. This role was a common one expressed by participants and fit many situations in which students were suspended. Participants also emphasized that many other interventions. also involving staff time. are applied prior to the "last resort" suspension.

(f) As a "cooling off" period. In this role, a student is excluded from the school so that the emotions of the moment may cool.

(g) As a deterrent or message to other students that a particular misbehavior is not appropriate and will not be allowed. In this instance a secondary benefit of the suspension is to prevent further difficulties from other students. The assumption is that other students will be influenced in a positive manner by the suspension of a peer.

(h) As a safeguard to protect other students' rights to an appropriate learning environment-- for example, to protect students from the harassment of their peers (*Aurelia D. v. Monroe County Board of Education*).

Participants' Observations

- *Schools fail 20% of the students because of a poor match between instruction and curriculum and attitudes that effect how kids get treated.*
- *Children don't start school equally prepared. Why pretend that they should complete school with equal outcomes?*
- *The problems we face today are the result of the solutions applied to yesterday's problems.*
- *There's an inverse relationship between students' age and their parents' involvement in education.*

2. Suspensions and/or expulsions are sometimes viewed as problems associated with "school climate," a concept which encompasses the social, emotional, and physical environment of a school. For example, suspension may occur due to conflicts between an individual student and the school system (e.g., regarding how problems are defined and what are appropriate responses and resolutions). Suspensions may also be used as a means to silence the school "critic" (i.e., those "vocal" students who refuse to conform to the rules).

3. External factors and issues also play a part in suspension and/or expulsion decisions since they influence administrators, teachers, and students. Some of these external issues involve:

(a) the importance of personal safety and the public perception of school safety;
(b) the community's perception and value of the educational process;
(c) the child's family situation and social influences on the family (e.g., increase in single parent families, lack of or inadequate parental support, limited participation in the community, lack of agreement with the school's values);
(d) an increasing cultural stratification and diversity in the school setting, juxtaposed with a narrow definition of appropriate behavior;
(e) the decline of the middle class (e.g., a decline in per capita income, a growing underclass, the "working" poor);
(f) health and medical needs (e.g., lack of adequate nutrition and health care).

Participants Share Views about Today's Students

- *We've got better kids in school now than we've ever had.*
- *Kids don't learn problem solving at home so we can't expect behavior from them that they haven't learned. They know right from wrong, but not how to alter behavior, how to handle conflict with others.*
- *Kids are different than 20 years ago. They don't have the social skills or values of the past.*
- *We ask teachers to tolerate too much. We should expel and suspend more.*

4. The quality of the instructional staff is an important influence on student behavior. Suspensions and/or expulsions may be viewed as a result of inadequate and/or inappropriate teacher preparation because:

(a) Teachers are simply not prepared to deal with the complexity, severity, or range of problems which students bring with them to school on a daily basis.
(b) Teachers are unable or unwilling to provide the individualization of instruction needed by some students (i.e., the belief that in order for students to be treated "fairly" they must all be treated the same).
(c) Teachers are unfamiliar with and lack an understanding of the issues involved in an IEP.
(d) Teachers have a narrow "comfort zone" with regard to the diverse characteristics presented by their students. This diversity is reflected in students' disabilities, language, dress styles, emotional needs, and academic motivation and achievements. Students most vulnerable to academic and behavioral problems are often those

whose characteristics are most disparate from the educator's own personal, cultural, and academic frames of reference. Accordingly, administrators and teachers have the greatest difficulty establishing rapport and understanding with those students who may need it the most.

5. Disjointed and uncoordinated services among service providers may exacerbate suspensions and expulsions. The experiences of some participants indicated that when a student became a client of another agency (e.g. SRS or the probation office), it did not guarantee that additional resources would be available or that the involvement/intervention would have a positive effect. For example, students who are "bounced around" among agency service providers are unable to take full and proper advantage of the services available. On the other hand, removal of a disruptive student by the courts might be beneficial to the school climate.

6. What do you think about the process or procedures in schools for suspensions and expulsions?

Too many administrators, parents, and students do not understand the procedures for and use of suspension and expulsion in the schools. For example, one misunderstanding of procedures concerns informal hearings for short-term suspensions. Each suspension must have a hearing, either formal or informal. In an informal hearing, which is chaired by the building administrator, all views of the incident must be expressed in order to determine an appropriate outcome. In a "true" hearing atmosphere, all sides are heard, the issues are presented, and solutions are discussed and agreed upon. Participants felt, however, that the informal hearing is too often viewed as a "sentencing" meeting rather than a fact finding effort to understand what happened. Rather than view the hearing as an opportunity for all parties to be heard and work together to describe events and identify and resolve problems, parents and students perceive it as "something that is done to them."

In addition, in some settings academic work completed during suspension does not count towards a student's grades. Thus, while the student is being punished for misbehaving, he or she has no incentive to attend to academics because the achievement is not counted. The consequence is increased student academic failure, frustration, retentions, age promotions, and dropping out of school. Participants thought that a better solution would be to promote academic achievement and allow school work completed during suspension to be applied towards course grades. This perspective might be easier to adopt if suspensions and expulsions were viewed as a continuum of alternative placements, not as a cessation of services.

7. What should be the definition of school violence?

Definitions of violence influence our perceptions of safe schools, and thus, are critical. In the 1992-93 "KSBE Building Report" the definition of violence was:

> *A malicious act against students or school employees which requires attention by a physician or nurse, or which results in the student receiving a long term suspension.*

In our meetings, the KSBE definition of violence was viewed as too narrow by participants because it did not accurately reflect the types of problems facing school personnel. The definition was also faulted because it excluded verbal assault, physical destruction, and even verbal or physical threats, all of which were viewed as both harmful and illegal behaviors.

Discussants offered several definitions of violence. One inclusive definition was "anything that interrupts the normal flow of school." This definition was viewed as too encompassing because the normal flow of school can be disrupted by many activities (e.g., school assembly, holiday parties, an accident on the playground, or weather changes), not just violence. Another more specific description of school violence was "a threat or verbally or physically aggressive act with the intent to injure self or others, or to destroy property. The seriousness of violence should also be judged on the intention (vs. accident) and consequence of the act." This latter definition had general support among participants although some improvements were also suggested. Based on the discussion and other materials, the authors offer the following definition:

> *Violence is physically aggressive acts which injure others or destroy property.*

The seriousness of violence should be judged on the (a) intention (vs. accident) and (b) consequence of the act. Judging intent of the act is not easy and, therefore, poses a significant challenge for those involved in making such a determination. Participants suggested a couple of other factors which could be important in making that determination, such as whether someone had intervened and whether the student had nevertheless continued to act in a violent manner.

A broader interpretation of violent behavior is included in the work by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing Advisory Panel on School Violence (CCTV, 1993). The CCTV viewed violence as a public health and safety condition which resulted from individual, social, economic, political, and institutional disregard for basic human needs. The CCTV would include most of the behaviors listed in Table 1 (p. 6) as violent. From the commission's perspective, violence included physical and nonphysical harm which causes damage, pain, injury, or fear. The result of violence is a disruption of the school environment and the

debilitation of personal development, which may lead to hopelessness and helplessness (CCTV, 1993, p. 24). We are concerned about the kinds of consequences described by the CCTV for exactly the reasons they cite, but are reluctant to be as inclusive as the CCTV in defining violent behaviors.

8. Are violence and safety issues problems in our schools?

Schools are no different than the larger society in which they are located. Thus, the answer to this question is likely to be "yes." Just as community citizens who act violently are few in number, so are the students who act violently. Unfortunately, the attention given these students for infrequent violent acts overshadows the outstanding qualities and accomplishments of the vast majority of their peers.

No one within school settings wants to view them as violent environments. Violence in schools attracts the media's attention and headlines and, as a consequence, projects a negative image about what goes on in schools. Often an important distinction is lost in the discussion about school violence. In the media the shift is from "students who commit violent acts" to "violent students."

Participants indicated that student misbehaviors and discipline problems are increasing. This increase is evidenced by more physical misbehavior, verbal assaults, serious behavioral problems, gang-related activities, and court involvement. The increase in misbehaviors or violent acts has had several effects on how such acts are viewed. One effect is that violent acts are "normalized." For example, in a large metropolitan area if a violent act occurs repeatedly in enough environments, the act is no longer seen as extreme; it becomes normalized and loses its shock value. On the other hand, in an environment in which violent acts are infrequent, a misperception may exist that there is really no problem.

However, those few acts can have significant and varied negative effects on school climate and staff morale.

Another effect is that the same misbehavior may be defined differently depending on the context. For example, "school yard fights," which could legally be called assaults, are likely to be treated as misbehaviors, especially if students are involved. Consider this scenario of how the following altercation might be judged: Two students are in line. Some teasing has occurred. One student turns away and is shoved by the second student. The shoving is reciprocated and one student falls down. At that point the kindergarten teacher shows up and tells the kindergarten boy and girl to straighten up and get back in line. In another context, such as at a high school and with two males or two females, or students of different races or gangs, we could imagine that the teasing might involve language judged more offensive and that the students' shoving might be in more earnest. Age, gender, race, and context do play roles in how incidents are interpreted and students are disciplined.

If a student and teacher are involved in an incident the perceived seriousness of the incident increases, as do the disciplinary and legal consequences. Unfortunately, if the student is in a self-contained classroom with students with behavior disorders, a student-teacher incident is less likely to be treated as an assault. Thus, the contextual circumstances have a lot of influence on how behavior is viewed and treated.

A final consequence of wanting to preserve the image of schools as non-violent settings is that some violent behaviors are not reported to the police. School staffs feel a burden to maintain a balance between ensuring the safety of students and presenting a positive image. Part of the dilemma is that schools are expected to have 100% success with every student, regardless of how the public defines "success." Schools are the only public institutions that are expected to work with everyone beginning at age three and accomplish a myriad of outcomes within a six-hour period: provide a safe, caring learning environment; provide a sanctuary from the pressures and abuses of home and community; provide a nutritional program for the students whose families don't; provide a public health program that protects all from infectious diseases; provide for the mental health needs of students; and provide varied academic and vocational programs resulting in an educated citizenry prepared for work or further education. Participants were very concerned about amount and types of expectations put on schools. Those expectations assume that the school experiences provided in a diverse, large group setting of 20 to 35 students by one teacher for a quarter of the day should carry over into the other 75% of a child's day and into multiple environments (e.g., home, neighborhood, community, and work).

Schools are also held accountable for the behavior of children and youth regardless of the activity or location (i.e., inside or outside of the school environment). For example, if a suspended youth is caught committing a crime during school hours, the inference is that the schools were not doing their job, since they have a responsibility to keep students in school. This perception sparked a lengthy discussion about the role of schools, community agencies, and families.

Student behaviors leading to suspension and expulsion include many behaviors that, according to conventional wisdom, would not be considered violent but might negatively affect a school's atmosphere or lower its reputation among the students and in the community. For example, most of the behaviors listed in Table 1 (Reasons for Suspension/ Expulsion) would not be considered violent (e.g., smoking). Consequently, myopically focusing on violent behaviors does not adequately represent all of the safety or school climate issues which concern school staff and community members. For example, verbal behaviors such as threats, taunting, harassment, and bullying are not violent according to our definition. Such behaviors, though, do violate one's sense of safety, hope, tolerance for differences, and individual respect, and some are illegal. For these reasons, verbal threats are just as serious as violent acts when one is concerned with salient influences on student and staff behavior. As noted in Table 1 (p.6), these nonviolent behaviors resulted in many students being excluded from school.

The absence of violent behavior does not mean that schools or school climate are positive experiences for all students. If people's sense of safety for themselves, their property, or other people is threatened, the issue *must* be addressed. Several participants suggested that a concept such as "school climate" would be more useful in this discussion, since it encompasses more than the violence and safety issues of immediate interest. For example, it includes student-teacher relationships and attitudes, the school's educational philosophy and how it is communicated to the student, the physical environment within the school, and how students feel about coming to school and what is expected of them. Under the broader category of school climate one could address issues concerning healthy lifestyles, self-respect, and the interactions among many groups (e.g., students, their parents or guardians, instructional staff, support staff, administrators, and community agency staff). School climate and safety involve all of the participants as well as other representatives at a school building level as the focus shifts from the local school setting to a larger community (e.g., bus drivers, legislators, judicial judges, and boards of education).

Are all students and classrooms equally safe? A special case seems to exist regarding violent and threatening behaviors from students in special education. Students with disabilities are more prone to exhibit disruptive behaviors (Cooley, 1995) that lessen the sense of classroom safety. Anecdotal information suggested that special education teachers were more likely to be victims of student violence than regular classroom

Kansas Profile

Percentage of public secondary school teachers who reported that student behavior interferes with their teaching.

1991 35% 1994 42%

Source: National Education Goals Report, Volume Two: State Data, 1995

teachers. Similarly, students in special education classrooms were more likely to be exposed to violent behaviors or unsafe settings than regular education students. Special education teachers are expected to be more "understanding" of the misbehaviors displayed by students with disabilities because these behaviors are often manifestations of the disability.

One concern expressed by participants was that students and staff members' civil rights are applied differently in special education than they are in regular education contexts. For example, behavior that normally would result in suspension or expulsion does not lead to such measures with a student with disabilities. Changing the rules of suspension and expulsion for students in special education does not seem supportive of other students' rights for equitable treatment or for teachers' civil rights. One participant commented, "I don't check out my civil rights just because I work in special education." Ensuring that everyone's rights are protected and their respective responsibilities are followed requires careful consideration by many individuals. At this time, the principles for determining the proper balance between competing rights and responsibilities of multiple stakeholders are unclear in the minds of many.

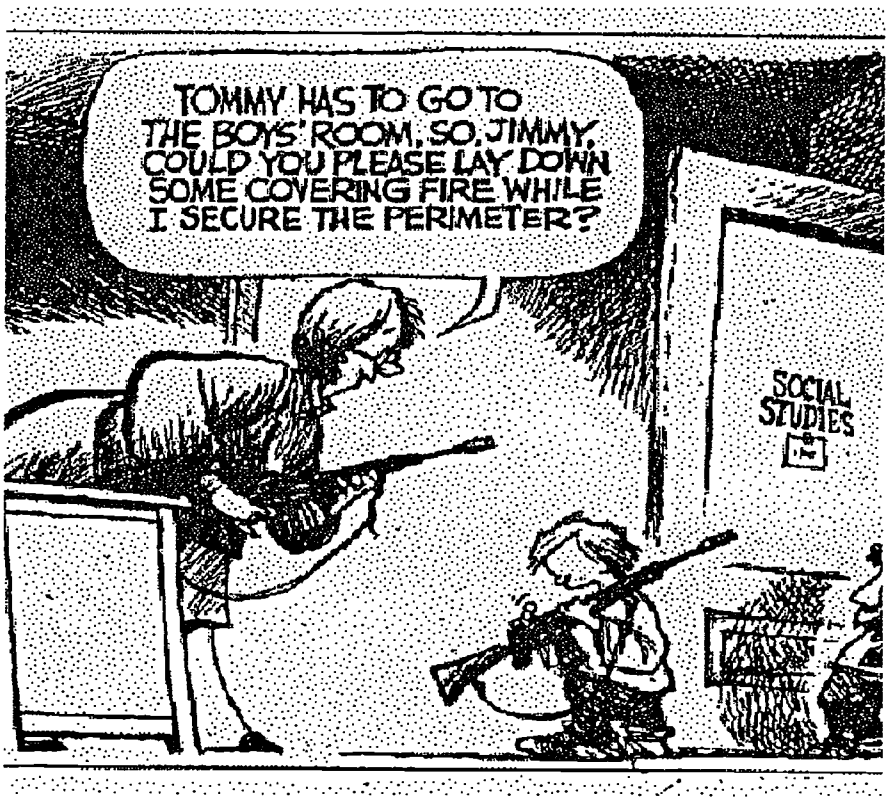
Part 4: Recommendations

We are hesitant to offer recommendations or plans due to the complexity of the issues. These issues will not be resolved quickly or with simple solutions. In the preceding paragraphs we have alluded to apparent conflicts in attitudes, policies, procedures, and practices. After examining these conflicts we advise that actions to provide further understanding of the issues and workable solutions should be aggressively pursued, but also that they be carefully tempered by detailed analyses, extensive field testing, and clear statements of intended outcomes. While all our group participants were extremely knowledgeable in their areas of experience and expertise, we believe that we have yet to hear the voices of several other relevant groups that will further broaden our knowledge

base, helping us to suggest and implement sensible and effective policies in the near future.

Missing Voices

Several groups that are frequently identified as important to understanding and addressing issues about suspension, expulsion, violence, and school climate were not represented in these discussions. They include: students who have *not* been suspended or expelled, students who have been suspended or expelled, parents of each of the two student groups, state legislators, law enforcement officers, judges, county attorneys, SRS



MacNelly, Chicago Tribune

social workers, high school teachers, and school social workers. Before making changes in policy, procedures, or practice, the issues addressed in these discussion groups should also be discussed with the groups mentioned above. They are significant stake-holders.

Given this perspective, the subsequent recommendations are tentatively offered. These recommendations are based upon participants' observations. Their content, extent, and priorities might change if additional stakeholder groups were included, and it is hoped that these

recommendations will be reviewed with the groups mentioned above for the additional viewpoints that might emerge.

Systems Approach

Reducing student violence, misbehaviors, suspensions, and expulsions and improving school climate cannot be accomplished by the schools alone. Society's influence is too strong. These issues involve the policies, procedures, and practices of numerous agencies. Thus, more than the schools must participate in developing and implementing changes. One difficulty is that significant, long-term benefits will not result from the preferred quick, inexpensive, small scale, incremental, "do-something" approaches. Many system representatives who work with families, children and youth must be involved. These systems include legislative, social, law enforcement, judicial, and educational services.

What's Wrong With This Picture?

Students have many reasons for disliking school. For one reason their experiences aren't considered.

A short time ago, a young girl was raped by her step-father. One evening, she was so distraught that she drank bleach in a suicide attempt. She was taken to the hospital and treated. The insurance company would not cover her admittance so she was sent home.

The next day she got up and went to school and we expected her to come in, sit down, take out her books, sit quietly, and learn just like the other kids.

Most educators expect that students come to school because they want to learn what the teachers teach. That's not the case for more and more of our kids today.

— Building administrator

Staff Preparation, Development and Support

Educators in the groups emphasized the need for and value of staff development activities to address issues at the state, school district, and school building levels, as well as for the individual teacher. For example, one issue at the state level is the lack of a shared definition of what is meant by "suspension." While common language suggests one practice, the discussants indicated that many practices are being defined and treated as suspensions. Since the KSBE and legislature are interested in monitoring suspensions and expulsions, a common shared description of suspension is needed. Counting, reporting, and interpreting disparate events as if they were the same is not reliable or appropriate.

Another example at the state level concerns rules regarding suspensions and expulsions of students with disabilities. These types of questions sparked great debates: Can a student with a disability (or IEP) only be suspended 10 days a year? What if we change a placement? Do the 10 days start over again? If the student is receiving services in one curricular area or related service, can the student be suspended out of school for the other curricular areas? What behaviors are manifestations of the student's disability? If aggressive behavior is a manifestation of the disability, what do we do in our small rural district with a student who punches her classmates and teachers routinely?

Some participants commented on the positive value that Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA) was having on improving academics. They also thought that a greater emphasis should be given to improving student behavior. Just as a school's report card includes academic outcomes, student behavioral outcomes should also be included.

On the school district level, several issues involve the procedures for suspension. *Schools within districts* have different rules regarding suspension and expulsion which create inequities for students.

At the school level and teacher level, practices that influence school climate should be assessed and plans developed that can improve those influences to provide a more positive school climate. For teachers and building administrators, implementing changes required to create a more positive school climate may be the most difficult, but also the most potent means of improving students' behavior and reducing the events leading to suspensions.

Participants generally believe that entry level teachers are the best trained they have ever been with regard to content area knowledge. However, teachers are not prepared to deal with the diversity, severity, and complexity of daily problems students bring to school. The key is to provide needed training and other support to help teachers increase their "comfort range" in working with students who are very different from them (i.e., students who do *not* want to be in school, who are "bored," who are overwhelmed with family problems, or who are "fragile").

Several participants noted how specific strategies can be used to de-escalate confrontational behaviors among students and staff. One difficulty with these strategies is that they are needed in circumstances in which one's cool, reasoned approach to problem-solving has been challenged by the emotions of the moment. Taking a detached, objective view can be very difficult in the face of an angry student and a classroom of youthful onlookers. Another difficulty is that these important problem-solving behaviors may only be needed infrequently and, thus, not readily practiced. Effective interventions must be developed in concert with supportive belief systems, not in isolation. Similarly, these issues will be

addressed more effectively in schools in which relevant perspectives are shared and accepted.

In addition to training, the need exists for other support for teachers, including child care, emotional support for dealing with crises, confirmation of their value, and enhancement of their sense of safety. Teachers are not immune to personal and societal pressures in their own lives, such as financial concerns, health care, child care, and dysfunctional family relationships. Yet, they are asked to make significant personal commitments to students which include personally protecting or intervening during violent activities. Day after day this commitment drains teachers' energy from the instructional and curricular activities essential to schooling. Front-line teachers need assistance with the students and situations that frustrate them.

This emphasis on staff development activities is warranted by the diversity of disciplinary practices and the apparent differing responses to student misbehavior. While districts' motives are genuine, disciplinary actions to individual students are variable, which violates important principles of equal and equitable treatment for students with and without disabilities.

Early Intervention Services

Many participants commented that students who are frequently suspended/expelled and/or have academic or social problems in school usually develop and demonstrate problems as pre-schoolers and kindergartners. Since high school students' problem behaviors can be traced through documentation to their early elementary years providing preventative types of services "early" is critical to averting chronic, more serious problems later.

Participants strongly supported early, intensive interventions involving appropriate agencies in a collaborative manner. They were equally positive about the early childhood interventions currently in use. Further expansion of services linking schools and homes was endorsed. One rhetorical question was, "Since we can reliably identify students at an early age who will be taking so many of our resources at a later age, why don't we intervene earlier?" Programs must effectively link the home and school climates and support parents who often feel overwhelmed with the daily trials they face related to financial, relationship, employment, housing, transportation, and child care issues.

Alternative Interventions for Violence and Misbehavior

Even after the best staff development, situations will occur in which school officials, teachers, and parents will conclude that the regular classroom is not an appropriate setting for a student. The situation might be related to the safety of the student, classmates, or teacher. This theme was extended to include a continuum of "supportive" school and

community resources. A variety of resource assistance is needed in schools and in the community for all constituents involved (e.g., students, parents/guardians, extended family members, school staff and their families). Some suggested types of supportive services and resources included:

(a) respite care for parents of students with disabilities (i.e., supportive services directed toward the family),

(b) "therapeutic" classrooms that coupled education and psychological interventions,

(c) pre-vocational/vocational programs,

(d) "alternative" types of school settings,

(e) "wrap-around" services,

(e) transition services,

(f) child care, health/medical services and school social workers.

With all of these interventions the impression was that incremental or "band aid" solutions were not effective. Such approaches have a historical record of being too little, too short-termed, and not integrated with community systems. This list of alternatives might be thought of as a menu. Not everyone's digestive system appreciates the same foods. Similarly, this menu of alternatives is not equally appropriate for all schools or districts. Some participants reported using very similar interventions as alternatives to suspensions and expulsions, but the same participants reported different degrees of success. Thus, we can conclude that no magic bullet will work for everyone. As yet, we are unclear about the conditions under which a given intervention is effective. The extensive professional literature on school restructuring and reform would most likely yield information on this process of matching interventions to settings (e.g., bottom up support, including all relevant stakeholders in the decision, extensive discussions, agreed upon goals for changes, agreeing to the measures of success, extensive training, providing support during implementation, and close monitoring of the fidelity of the intervention).

Alternative schools were mentioned as options, although they were not uniformly supported. Many thought of alternative schools as part of the "continuum of services," but also thought that if more parts of the continuum were available, many of the issues could be solved. Some of the comments heard were to the effect that alternative schools should not be used at all because they took too many resources. On the other hand, some participants commented that an alternative is needed for those students who cannot be controlled with the contingencies and

supports available in the typical classroom. Such students might be the seriously emotionally disturbed, those who act physically and verbally aggressive, and those who have conduct disorders or are considered sociopathic or psychopathic.

In the situations in which alternative schools were considered positive, participants wanted an alternative school for very young children, for strong academics to be incorporated into the alternative school, and to ensure that placements in alternative schools were not permanent. Students should not graduate from alternative schools; they need support to prepare them to function in the regular school environment.

Need for More Resources

A lack of resources was uniformly mentioned. Students do not get the services they need because of inadequate school resources,, including technical and financial support. A shared sentiment was that budgetary and financial constraints rather than the efficacy of the program in improving student outcomes determine whether programs are developed and/or continued.

This issue of resources was intertwined with the multiple expectations of schools. What is the primary responsibility of schools? Is it to educate students (e.g., knowledge in the content areas), to educate a citizenry to participate in communities, or to provide a healthy, positive school climate (i.e., which meets the needs for safety, sense of belonging, and being cared for and valued)? How are schools supposed to interact with other groups at different levels (e.g., home, community, and state agencies)?

Better Communication And Collaboration Among Agencies

Since the students involved in school suspensions, expulsions, and violent activities are at a higher risk of having related problems, other agencies must contribute to long-term solutions (e.g., SRS, courts, police, sheriff, human resources, and juvenile services).

Many complaints focused on the lack of communication and collaboration between service agencies. This failure to coordinate efforts created additional problems in other areas such as: conflicts over rules, regulations, and procedures among agencies; duplication of services or working at "cross-purposes" (i.e., little/no collaboration among service-providers); lack of documentation (i.e., the documentation does not follow a student from one school/agency to another school/agency) or ineffective sharing of documentation of services (i.e., the documentation "shows up" 2 or 3 weeks after a student is placed at a school by SRS); and "bouncing" students around from agencies to agencies without being properly serviced (i.e., sets up the student to fail). The sense was that an agency like SRS uses arbitrary, fiscally-based rather than effectiveness

standards to make decisions regarding placements and information sharing.

According to participants, some outstanding programs are providing effective services for students. However, information about these effective programs is not widely known because of competing demands for time or resources. Unfortunately, the consequence is that many times schools and communities waste resources in defining problems and developing solutions rather than using available information. The dearth of inter-agency communication also results in a lack of awareness of and/or under-utilization of services and/or resources that may be offered in communities. Sharing effective school and program data is needed in order to develop and perpetuate other successful programs.

More collaboration in the IEP Process

The IEP needs to become more of a collaboration among students, parents, teachers (i.e., both regular and special education), staff, and other community members (e.g., other service providers such as SRS, juvenile officers, courts, etc.) so that everyone has some ownership in the process. One problem is that the IEP is an educator's tool. It fulfills the educator's legal requirement and no one else's. It is rarely adapted to reflect other agencies' concerns or legal requirements, although in a broad sense these agencies should be partners in the student's education. IEPs need to become more informative, more refined, and more individualized (i.e., not just printouts of a computer's database duplicated from year to year without modifications). They should be implemented jointly among teachers and other agencies' staff. Everyone who is working with a youngster needs to know what the goals and objectives are and to take part in the implementation of instruction to meet those goals.

Conclusion

What did we learn from these experiences? Much more than we can include in this document. We hope that we have reflected the diversity of expressed opinions. If the reader is confused by the apparent contradiction's, so are we. We see great opportunities for changes that will benefit all students and their communities. But significant changes will require significant shifts in the perspectives of many agencies and organizations. Schools cannot work alone. The sincere commitment expressed by participants and the multiple examples they cited of local efforts already underway make us optimistic that positive changes can occur. We reiterate the need for a broader base of input in understanding these issues, and for collaborative efforts across agencies.

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Postscript

In early July we sent a draft version of this report to focus group participants. The overall response was quite positive. While we were not able to incorporate all the changes participants suggested, we appreciate the careful reading of the final report and the feedback. Several participants wished to add statements, and these appear below.

Dick Patterson (Assistant High School Principal):

I would suggest that when the State takes the child out of the home it should assume the role of an excellent parent.

1. Have the child start school at the beginning of a grade period.
2. Transfer state educational funds on a per diem basis (like Housing is currently doing).
3. Work with the school to develop a transition program for the students' individual needs.
4. S.R.S students should have a 12-month educational program if needed.

Kathy Hill (Behavior Disorder Liaison):

It's amazing how similar the discussions and recommendations were state-wide.

Katherine Kersenbrock-Ostmeyer (Assistant Director of Special Education):

I didn't notice a story I heard from the special education teacher in dodge City. The incident she reported concerned a suspended youth, who on the third day of the suspension murdered someone. I felt this was very powerful and if possible would like to see it included. The key issue being: suspension can be a very inappropriate response to some students in need.

Note: We have now included part of the story mentioned above on page 16.

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