

If Not Suspend, Then What?

Although there is an abundance of evidence demonstrating the negative effects of suspension, it continues to be the most commonly used method of discipline throughout the nation. We understand choosing alternative forms of discipline will be more challenging and time consuming in the beginning. Here are some common oppositional messages we hear as we present our approach on discipline. Do any of these messages sound familiar?

BUT...

"I had to make an example out of him."

"I don't have time to do it the other way."

"I want my teachers to know I support them."

"We need to inconvenience the parents."

"I don't want the other parents to feel that nothing was done."

"We need a break from this student."

"Alternatives require more work and are more time-consuming."

"There is no way we have the time or staffing to do this."

"Why not just suspend?"

When suspending a student (knowing full well that suspensions will not change behavior), what are the actual outcomes expected from the suspension? The statements above are excuses that dismiss a student's behavior for a few days and make it easier for the adults involved. The oppositional messages above can be grouped into three categories that "save."

The three saves of suspension:

Save time:

"I don't have time to do it the other way."

"There is no way we have the time or staffing to do this."

Save face:

"I don't want the other parents to feel that nothing was done."

"I want my teachers to know I support them."

"We need to inconvenience the parents."

"I had to make an example out of him."

Save energy:

"Alternatives require more work and are more time-consuming."

"We need a break from this student."

Notice how everything being "saved" is for the benefit of adults and not the students at risk of failure. Students frequently suspended are 18 times more likely to drop out of high school (a high school dropout will make \$8,000 less annually than a high school graduate) and more likely to be incarcerated (\$9,200 per year spent to educate a child vs. \$62,000 per year spent on a prison inmate). Knowing the negative outcomes suspensions produce, educators still use these oppositional messages as excuses that help them save time, save face, and save energy; however, discipline practices need to shift from convenience for adults to saving lives and reshaping a student's path toward a successful outcome for their future.

Then What?

Misconceptions arise when the term alternative discipline is mentioned in lieu of

suspensions; some think of alternative discipline as an excuse to dismiss poor behavior. Clearly, this is not what is meant by alternative discipline. To help clarify, you need to know what alternative discipline **is not**.

Alternative Discipline is not stopping the suspension of students in order to meet a school or district behavior data quota. *It is using other means of discipline to help students learn from their behaviors rather than sending them home as the first response.*

Alternative Discipline is not ignoring the stakeholders who have been affected by the student's behavior. *It is working with the stakeholders to help restore what has been damaged and work together to help the student change his/her behavior.*

Alternative Discipline is not assigning the same discipline for every student without knowing the reason for the misbehavior. *It is taking the time to learn about what triggered the behavior in the first place.*

Alternative Discipline is not a school that does not have effective behavior systems (foundation) in place to support responding to discipline in this fashion. *It is how discipline is handled in a school that has systems of behavioral supports in place for school-wide, targeted/at risk groups, and individualized students (special education and general education).*

Alternative Discipline is not assigned without consistent implementation and follow through. *It is a method of delivery that requires the administrator and stakeholders to work together and ensure all components of the alternative discipline are put into place and implemented with fidelity.*

Alternative Discipline is not easy to do. *It is time intensive and requires a belief system in the leader(s) of the school and/or district to create a culture that supports working with students in this fashion.*

Alternative discipline **is** a framework for assigning meaningful discipline to students. Alternative discipline has to include a Restorative, Reflective, and Instructional component. Administrators can use any combination of the three (two restorative, two instructional, and one reflective); there isn't a secret formula for how many of each to use as long as you include all three. The consequence needs to be meaningful for the student.

To learn what to do instead of suspending students as the traditional go to, use the book *Don't Suspend Me!* as a guide for implementing effective alternative discipline. This book is designed to help improve the culture of discipline in schools; beginning with the beliefs of the administrators and teachers. Strong school leaders who believe in this process use this book as a book study or part of their ongoing professional development with their staff. Strong district leaders have utilized this book with their school board, cabinet, administrators, support staff, and other district office leadership to build the context and

understanding behind the “why” for all stakeholders. To shift the belief about discipline approaches from the district office level to the schools, everyone needs to understand the “If not suspend, then what?” component when evolving from a broken system that has been in place for decades.