



Separate But Equal

An in-school suspension program helps keep troubled students focused on class work

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After a decade of dispensing out-of-school suspensions to the same angry, disenfranchised, or ambivalent students and their disappointed, tired, or bewildered parents, we realized that there had to be a better way to handle discipline problems. Obviously, schools can't teach students if they're not in school.

Recent studies document that students who feel connected to school are likely to improve on critical accountability measures. So, to achieve, students need to have a sense of belonging and attachment. Unfortunately, suspensions disconnect students who already are experiencing difficulties by further alienating them.

Yet administrators have used out-of-school suspensions for students with chronic tardiness, truancy, and minor behavior infractions for years. Recent legislation passed by the Connecticut General Assembly and signed into law requires in-school suspensions except when students pose a danger to persons or property or when they are a serious disruption to the educational process.

The new law has districts searching for creative alternatives to unproductive out-of-school suspensions. Cromwell High's "In-School Suspension Program" is one alternative that is meeting the academic and behavioral needs of its students, staff, and families. The purpose of our program is to provide a safe, supervised suspension program that is separate from the regular school environment but still focused on academics.

Separate but connected

A 2008 study entitled *Missing Out: Suspending Students from Connecticut Schools*, by Taby Ali and Alexandra Dufresne of Connecticut Voices for Children, says that many of these children "are already struggling academically and so when they return to school after missing even a few days they feel there is no way to catch up."

Cromwell's program separates students with demonstrated behavior issues, yet maintains students' connectedness with school officials, teachers, and current school work. It

also provides a quiet classroom that permits and documents school assignment completion and submission. Teachers make commitments to provide current assignments.

A senior policy fellow at Connecticut Voices, Dufresne says, "We need to invest in discipline policies that promote positive learning environments, preserve educational opportunity and strengthen the personal relationships between at-risk students and caring adults in schools." Keeping "connected to school is one of the most important factors in student success," she says.

Cromwell's program presents students with a daily school schedule. In addition to reviewing the rules and working on school assignments, students complete a personal narrative, and participate in exercises meant to strengthen their self-respect, responsibility, and readiness to learn. They also create an accountability action plan. The narrative asks students to reflect on their behavior, the ensuing consequences, alternate decisions, and possible remediation strategies.

Students answer the following questions: Why is school important? How could school be better for you? What are your plans after finishing high school?

The respect, responsibility, and readiness to learn assignments encourage students to identify positive behavior patterns and link them to decision-making scenarios. The Accountability Action Plan is the final step in getting students to take responsibility for their behavior and accountability for better future decision-making. What do they plan to do now? What do they need to change? How will things be different?

Discipline, not punishment

The focus of Cromwell's program is discipline, not punishment. Its components are:

- **Instruction:** Address the root cause of the behavior issue. Why was the student suspended? What rules were broken? What attitude was displayed? What actions were carried out and what consequences ensued?

- **Training:** Strengthen academic skills. Provide an

opportunity to reflect on the behavior and alternative decision-making choices that would have generated more positive results. Facilitate values discussions related to specific offenses, identifying the need to consistently link positive student values to resulting student decisions and actions. We also define the benefits of self-discipline.

■ **Correction:** Determine with the students an accountability action plan. Assess the need for an apology and a timely response. Follow up with students and ensure that lessons were learned and incorporated into subsequent student conduct and behavior.

Our in-school suspension supervisor works closely with administrative staff, the school social worker, resource officer, and teaching staff to flag any severe behavioral tendencies or concerns. He also participates as a member of our Early Intervention Core Team, which explores educational options for individual students prior to a referral to special education programs. Too often, students with behavioral problems are prematurely assigned to special education for evaluations and potential placement. We want to meet student needs so that they don't get referred unnecessarily to special education. Our program supervisor spends time getting to know these students and is an additional resource in our positive preventative measures.

While serving their suspension, students complete a report that helps link classroom teachers to student assignment completion. Completed assignments are returned to teachers that day. Positive teacher responses to assignments and test completions encourage students to return to classes motivated and knowing that they haven't fallen behind their classmates.

Schools that use in-school suspension supervisors six hours a day solely as detention monitors are missing out on important opportunities to connect the supervisor to the culture of the school. Our in-school suspension supervisor chairs the student recognition program and coordinates the monthly service learning initiative. Now he also is associated with a program that acknowledges and celebrates student success.

While coordinating the "CHS Cares" service learning project, the supervisor works closely with student groups and staff. He has spearheaded the school's efforts to encourage students to volunteer for school and community service. Activity initiatives so far have included a fundraising effort for an alumnus who is raising funds and awareness for traumatic brain injuries, a winter clothing drive to support the school's urban partnership community, and a blood drive.

What to look for

When searching for your in-school suspension supervisor, look for someone who is creative, confident, and genuinely interested in student success. The days of hiring a former security guard or retired police officer to simply monitor and control students in a dark, dreary room are over.

Today's in-school suspension supervisor must be able to connect with students and staff, assist students with school work, and be prepared to contribute to the wider school community. The individual's respect for students must be demonstrated and based on the belief that all students can be academically and behaviorally successful.

So how do we find these extraordinary people? Mark Sanborn, in his recent book, *The Fred Factor*, offers us good advice on how to discover dormant leaders and hire them. Some questions to ask yourself about your potential hire: What do I remember most about the person? What's the most extraordinary thing he or she has ever done? How badly would this person be missed if he or she left a current position? In many ways, the goals are the same as with teachers and all of our ancillary staff. Successful classrooms feature exceptional teachers. Successful ISS programs also require exceptional individuals. The challenge is to aggressively seek them out.

The program anticipates that students "graduate" out of in-school suspension. They have an increased awareness and some new behavior management tools, and we expect them not to return to the program.

As one student wrote in his accountability action plan, "After a long day in ISS, I have learned to deal more positively with similar situations in the future."

Of course, some students may return. Another exercise helps them to see how their negative patterns are getting in the way of their own stated goals. In the end, students should feel badly about what they've done, but not about who they are.

The program's measurable goals are: a reduction in the school dropout rate; decreased out-of-school suspensions; decreased discipline referrals; and a positive evaluation by students, teachers, and parents. As these benchmarks are documented and student participation in the program diminishes, it simply extends the opportunities for the supervisor to accomplish more in the related areas. Statistics will be assessed quarterly with a full annual report and evaluation at the completion of the school year.

The ISS program is in its third year of operation. In an end-of-year survey completed by 85 percent of high school staff, the teachers strongly agreed that in-school suspension was an effective intervention for students. When asked if students were being sent to in-school suspension for the right reasons, the staff strongly agreed.

Many have asked, "Can you really make much of a difference in the course of a single day?" Our answer: In-school suspension is the equivalent of over a week's worth of hour-long classes. We expect to have an impact. ■

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