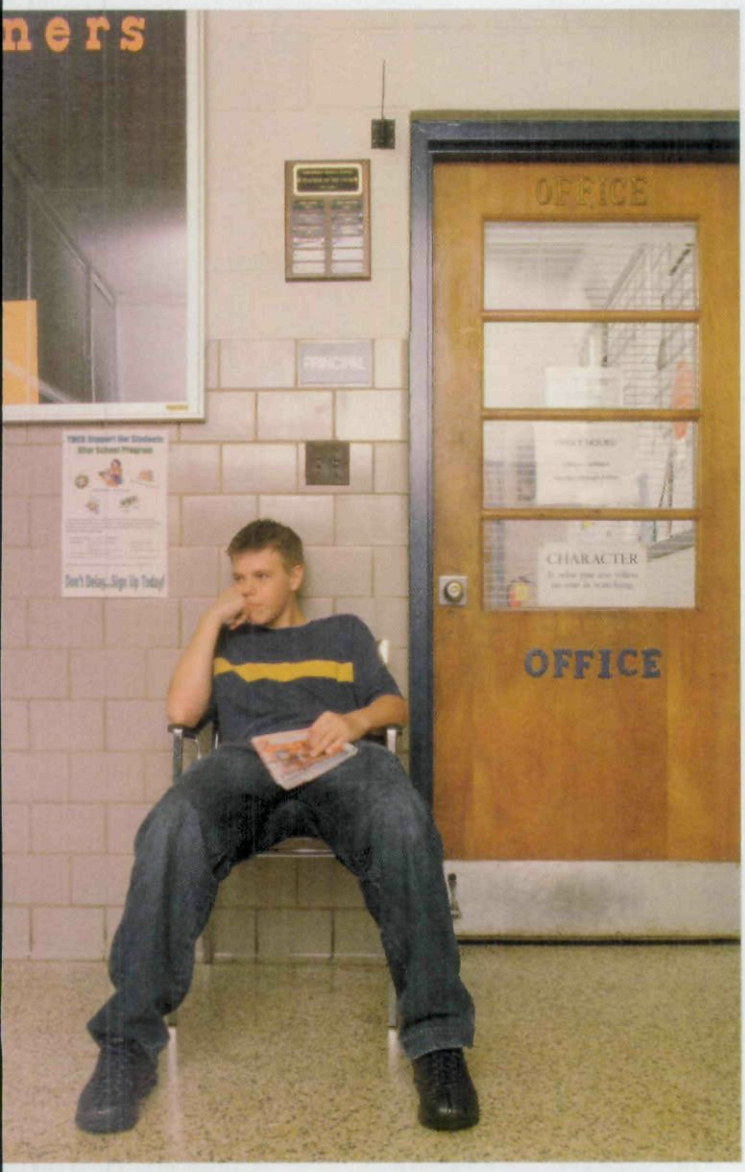
Safety Without Suspensions



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Many schools are reducing suspensions and expulsions through a comprehensive approach called School-wide Positive Behavioral Support.

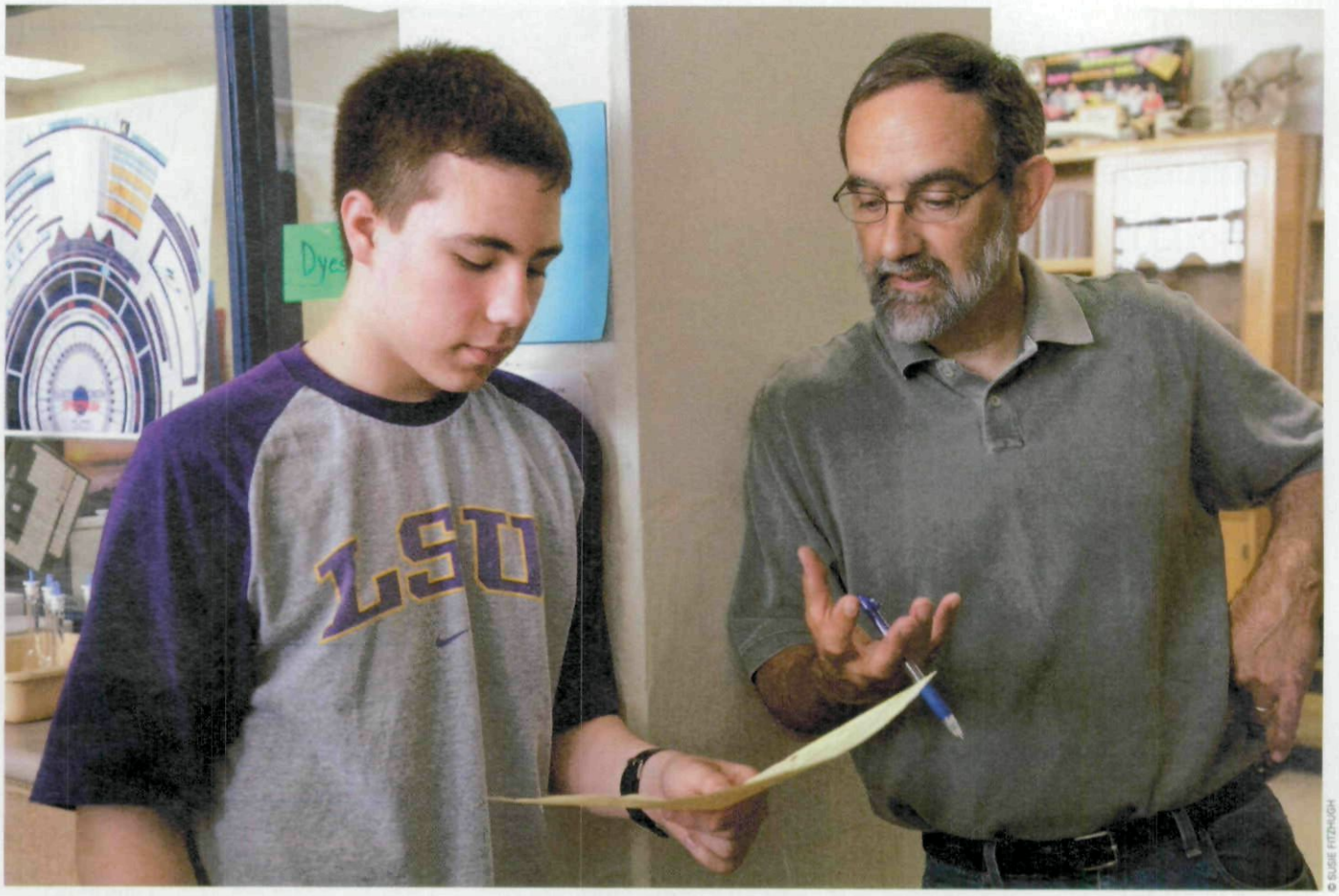
Russell Skiba and Jeffrey Sprague

Disruptive behavior consistently tops the list of teachers' and parents' concerns about education. In an effort to address this concern, many U.S. schools began adopting zero-tolerance policies in the 1990s, which led to substantial increases in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Wald & Losen, 2003). These policies have sparked controversy because of racial disparities in suspension and expulsion rates as well as incidents in which students have been suspended or expelled for seemingly trivial infractions, such as making a paper gun (American Psychological Association, 2006). In today's climate, principals seem to face a tough choice between keeping their school safe and ensuring that all students have continued educational opportunity.

But do these two goals have to be mutually exclusive? If, as research suggests, exclusionary, zero-tolerance approaches to school discipline are not the best way to create a safe climate, how can school leaders maintain discipline and safety? School-wide Positive Behavior Support is one effective, positive approach.

Exclusionary Approaches to Discipline

Let's first look at two frequently used disciplinary methods. *Suspension* refers to the relatively short-term removal of



students from school for a disciplinary infraction. Suspension is among the most widely used disciplinary procedures in schools today. The frequency of suspension appears to vary greatly among schools: Studies of school suspension at the local level have reported rates of suspension ranging from 9 percent to 92 percent of the student body; one statewide study reported that 10 percent of schools were responsible for 50 percent of the suspensions in the state (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

Expulsion, used far less frequently than suspension, refers to a more procedural removal of a student, for a longer period of time, typically involving a decision by the superintendent and school board. Most often, 10 days is considered the dividing line between suspension and expulsion, but schools sometimes expel students for a semester, a year, or longer (Skiba, Eaton, & Sotoo, 2004).

Suspension and expulsion are used more at the middle and high school levels than at the elementary school level; urban schools use these methods more often than suburban or rural schools do; boys are more likely to be suspended or expelled than girls are (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

A Devil's Bargain

Clearly, schools have a right and responsibility to use all effective means to ensure that students can learn and teachers can teach. Yet school suspension and expulsion are something of a devil's bargain. It is hard to justify interventions that rely on excluding a student from school when we know that time spent in learning is the single best predictor of positive academic outcomes.

For principals, the question becomes one of costs and benefits. Does the removal of troublesome students from school reduce disruption and improve school climate enough to offset the inherent risks to educational opportunity and school bonding? Research indicates that the answer is no.

Poor Outcomes

If anything, the data indicate that disciplinary removal has negative effects on student outcomes and the learning climate. Students suspended in 6th grade are *more* likely to receive office referrals or suspensions by 8th grade than students who had not been suspended, prompting some researchers to conclude that suspension may act more as a reward than as a

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punishment for some students (Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996).

Studies have found school suspension to be moderately associated with higher dropout rates (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). In some cases, suspension may be used to rid the school of perceived troublemakers. Yet, counterintuitively, purging the school of such students does not appear to improve school climate. Schools with higher rates of school suspension tend to have lower academic quality, pay significantly less attention to school climate, and receive lower ratings on quality of school governance measures (American Psychological Association, 2006). Most important, emerging data indicate that schools with higher suspension and expulsion rates have lower outcomes on standardized achievement tests, regardless of economic level or student demographics (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

Inconsistent Implementation

Research shows that school suspension and expulsion are applied inconsistently across schools and school districts. That inconsistency appears to be connected as much to classroom, school, and principal characteristics as to student behavior.

We often assume that schools reserve suspension for serious offenses, such as fighting. But schools actually use suspension in response to a wide range of behaviors, including tardiness and truancy, disruptive behavior, noncompliance, and insubordination. Only a small percentage of suspensions occur in response to behaviors that threaten school safety or security (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998).

Further, who gets suspended or expelled depends not only on student characteristics and behavior, but also on school factors. The quality of school governance, demographics, and staff attitudes all play roles in determining the rates of school disciplinary actions. It is not surprising, for instance, that principals who favor zero tolerance have higher rates of suspension and expulsion in their schools (Advancement Project & Civil Rights Project, 2000; Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

Unfair Application

Research has found a high degree of racial disparity in school suspension and expulsion. Black students are consistently suspended at rates two to three times higher than those for other students, and they are similarly overrepresented in office referrals, expulsions, and corporal punishment (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Race remains a significant contributor to the likelihood of being disciplined in school, even after controlling statistically for poverty (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, in press).

Such discrepancies are not due to higher rates of misbehavior by black students. If anything, black students are punished more severely for less serious and more subjective infractions (Skiba et al., 2002). The overrepresentation of black students appears to begin at the stage of office disciplinary referrals from classroom teachers. Some evidence suggests that these disparities are caused at least in part by cultural mismatch or insufficient training in culturally responsive classroom management (Townsend, 2000; Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

An Effective Alternative

In our work with schools and school districts throughout the United States,

we have observed that school administrators do not use suspension and expulsion because they wish to remove students from the opportunity to learn. Rather, most administrators turn to school exclusion as a disciplinary tool because they need to do something and don't know what else to do. Principals are looking for effective, practical alternatives to suspension and expulsion.

One such alternative is a comprehensive, proactive approach to discipline commonly known as School-wide Positive Behavior Support. This approach is based on the assumption that when educators across the school actively teach, expect, and acknowledge appropriate behavior, the proportion of students with serious behavior problems decreases and the school's overall climate improves.

The process for adopting and sustaining School-wide Positive Behavior Support typically revolves around a school team composed of 5–10 individuals, including an administrator, representative staff members, and family and community members, as well as students at the secondary level. This group, representing all school stakeholders, learns the key practices of School-wide Positive Behavior Support and sets goals for improvement. The team members then function as leaders or coaches during the improvement process. The team generally meets about once a month.

School-wide Positive Behavior Support has three main components that work together: prevention, multitiered support, and data-based decision making.

Prevention

Effective prevention depends on (1) defining and systematically teaching schoolwide core behavioral expectations and (2) establishing a consistent system to acknowledge and reward appropriate behavior, such as compliance with school rules, safe and respectful peer-to-peer interactions, and academic effort.

For example, at Kennedy Middle School in Eugene, Oregon, the implementation team adopted the general rule framework of *Be Safe, Be Respectful,* and *Be Responsible*. Teachers directly taught lessons throughout the year on the patterns of behavior associated with these personal qualities. In addition, the school posted the rules in hallways and classrooms, in school newsletters, in the local media, in the morning announcements, and during assemblies. The school also established a consistent system of enforcement, monitoring, and positive reinforcement to enhance the effects of rule teaching and maintain patterns of desired student behavior. All adults in the building gave tickets to students whom they observed following school rules; each ticket had a picture of the school mascot and a statement of the specific rule the student had followed. These tickets were redeemable for rewards and were backed up with weekly drawings and rewards for the teachers of exemplary students as well.

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Multitiered Support

A second important component of School-wide Positive Behavior Support is establishing a consistent, multitiered continuum of consequences and supportive reteaching for students who exhibit problem behavior. The greater the student's need for support, the more intense the support provided.

Schools with clear rule and reward systems and businesslike, predictable corrections and sanctions experience fewer discipline problems. When rules are consistent with stated expectations and are applied fairly, students develop a respect for rules and laws and believe that the system of governance works.

Kennedy Middle School redesigned its office discipline referral form to clearly define *minor* versus *major* behavioral violations. When a teacher or staff member observes a minor behavior problem, he or she first reminds the student of a school rule using a calm, respectful voice: "Hold on, Billy. You are running. Tell me the rule about hallways." Usually, Billy responds with the rule, but if he either can't or won't, the adult tells him the expectation and has him repeat it: "Oh yeah! Walk in the hallways." The adult then asks why ("Because it's safe!") or reminds him how the behavior connects to the broader schoolwide rule. The adult then asks the student to "show me how you walk in the hallway" and praises him if he is successful. If the student continues to misbehave or does not comply, the adult gives a brief warning and small consequence, such as loss of a privilege.

For major problems (including chronic minor misbehavior), the student is sent to the administrator in charge of discipline, who develops an appropriate, individualized consequence and reteaching plan. Kennedy staff members decided that a predetermined, inflexible set of consequences for problem behaviors would be less effective than a system of consequences and reteaching adapted to the unique needs of each student.

Data-Based Decision Making

Data-based decision making is interwoven throughout School-wide Positive Behavior Support. Access to regular, accurate information about student behavior enables educators to design the most effective preventive and reactive supports. The approach requires that schools adopt practical strategies for collecting, summarizing, reporting, and using data on regular cycles.

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Kennedy Middle School adopted a Web-based system for tracking discipline patterns called the School-wide Information System. The school developed and adopted a standard office referral form, which the school secretary uses to enter the data weekly. The administrator and Positive Behavior Support team members review the data monthly and report any patterns at the monthly staff meeting. The reports include the total number of referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (compared with previous years and disaggregated by race); types of behaviors; location of the incidents; time of day; and the proportion of students with 0–1, 2–5, or 6 or more referrals. Using these data patterns, the school develops and implements strategies to reduce the specific problems revealed.

Evidence of Effectiveness

More than 6,000 schools across the United States now actively implement School-wide Positive Behavior Support. These schools are reporting reductions in problem behaviors, improved perceptions of school safety, and improved academic outcomes.

A series of studies has documented some of the effects of the intervention in elementary and middle schools (Metzler, Biglan, Rusby, & Sprague, 2001; Sprague et al., 2002). Studies have shown dramatic reductions in office discipline referrals (up to 50 percent), with continued improvement in schools that sustain the intervention (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004). In addition, school staff members report greater satisfaction with work and increased time for teaching (Scott & Barrett, 2004). Administrators report more time to provide support to the most at-risk students. Student ratings of school climate and interpersonal interactions improve, and students report lower levels of aggression and engagement in risk behavior (Metzler et al., 2001). Comparison schools consistently show increases or no change in office discipline referrals, along with general frustration with the existing school discipline programs.

Safe Schools Without Exclusion

Shocking acts of violence in U.S. schools have caught the nation's attention and made it clear that maintaining the safety and integrity of school climate must be one of the country's highest priorities in education. As we continue to gain new understandings about the link between student behavior and achievement, the challenge for education leaders is to implement more effective, less exclusionary methods for maintaining safe, productive school climates.

Evidence shows that School-wide Positive Behavior Support can change the trajectory of students who are on a path toward destructive outcomes, as well as prevent the onset of negative behavior in typically developing students. More and more schools are finding that such comprehensive, systemic programs can reduce school disruption and improve school climate without reducing students' opportunity to learn. EL

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Authors' note: More information on School-wide Positive Behavior Support is available from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs at www.pbis.org. This information includes links to district and state initiatives supporting the dissemination of School-wide Positive Behavior Support (see www.pbis.org/map.htm).

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EL *online*

For an example of School-wide Positive Behavior Support in action, go to the September issue of *Educational Leadership* online at www.ascd.org/el. "A Lunchroom Solution," by Lori Korinek, describes how an elementary school in Virginia achieved a 30-percent reduction in discipline referrals in two years after implementing School-wide Positive Behavior Support.