

Study of Alternatives to Suspension Continuum of Recommended Program Services and Components

Executive Summary *Fall, 2005*



by

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**FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
STUDY OF ALTERNATIVES TO
OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION**

**Continuum of Recommended
Program Services and Components**

Introduction

In the fall of 2003, the Florida Department of Education contracted with Evaluation Systems Design, Inc. (ESDI) of Tallahassee, Florida, to conduct a **Study of Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspension**. Defined purposes of the study were to:

- 1. Identify existing practices regarding alternatives to suspension currently being used in school districts within the State of Florida.**
- 2. Identify outcome-based best practices.**
- 3. Identify essential components of outcome-based best practices.**
- 4. Develop an array of programs that can be used by districts as effective outcome-based alternatives to suspension.**

The study extended over two years, culminating in this final report that presents a recommended continuum of outcome-based best practices for alternative suspension services, including information on the use of service learning in some of these alternative programs. This report is submitted by ESDI as the final document in a series of three reports documenting the activities and outcomes of the two-year study. The Executive Summary, full report on the continuum, and two previous reports are available on the publications section of the Evaluation Systems Design, Inc. website at <http://www.esdi.cc>. For further information concerning the complete study, contact Dr. Constance C. Bergquist at Evaluation Systems Design, Inc. (esdi@talstar.com or 850-893-9504).

Context of the Study

School systems in Florida and states across the nation are struggling with the essential conflicts presented when students misbehave in school. The most severe consequence is to suspend or expel students. These approaches, however, result in students losing educational opportunities that may be critical to their futures. Frequently, the students who are suspended are those who are most in need of additional, intensive instruction to meet increasingly stiff academic standards for high school diplomas. Without the structure of attending school, many of these students turn to illicit activities that lead them to incarceration, costing our society even more financial and human resources. Suspension and expulsion contribute to an underclass of poorly educated adults who are employed at the lowest economic levels and are incarcerated at a much higher rate than any other segment of society. The results are lost wages for the economy and a host of other social and economic problems for the students who leave school, their families, and for the economic and social health of our country. Suspending and expelling students from schools is in diametrical opposition to the basic reason our society has established public education: to educate the children of our society.

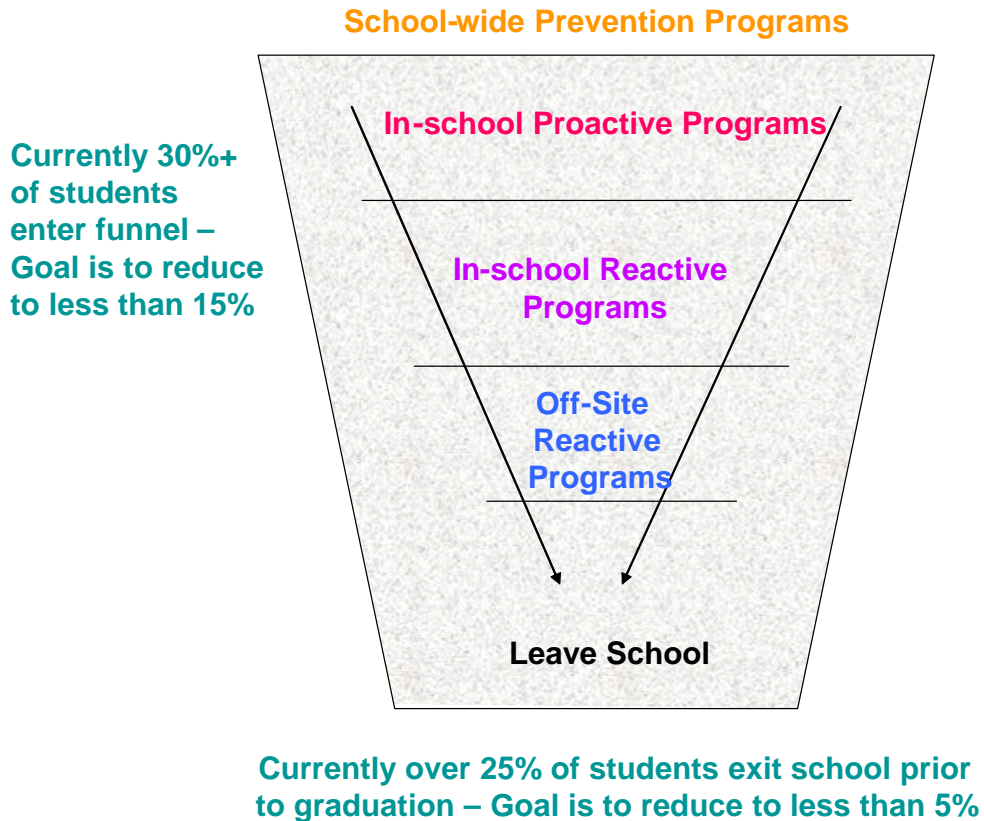
Overview of the Proposed Continuum

Two years of survey research and in-depth reviews of out-of-school (OSS) and in-school suspension (ISS) programs across Florida documented little consistency in the approaches used by school districts to address and reduce suspensions of students. Instances of promising practices, however, were documented and are offered in this report as a proposed continuum of alternatives including preventive, proactive and reactive strategies. This continuum is presented to encourage and support district and school administrators in applying the most effective methods possible to address the root causes of the behaviors resulting in suspension of students, and in breaking the cycle that appears to inexorably doom students to dropping out of school.

Using alternatives, school districts can reduce their ISS and OSS rates and retain more students in their regularly assigned classrooms. In 2003-04, the overall high school graduation rate for the state was 71.6%, revealing that 28.4% of Florida students dropped out of school before graduation. The rates are even higher for African-American and Hispanic students. Although there are several factors that may impact these calculations, the graduation rate should approach 100%. That is, our statewide goal should be for every student to attain a high school diploma.

Figure 1 displays a conceptual organizer for the variety of programs and interventions in the form of a “funnel” that results in students dropping out of school or being expelled. The purpose of the Continuum is to increase the use of the most effective strategies and programs to close the funnel and keep as many students as possible in school and learning to their maximum potential.

Figure 1
**Graphic Organizer for the Continuum of Interventions to Reduce
In-school and Out-of-School Suspensions**



The first level in the Continuum includes school-wide prevention programs designed to improve adherence to discipline policies and instill a culture of collaboration and learning throughout the school. Although all schools are required to have prevention programs that discourage students from leaving school, federal and state funding for dropout prevention programs and other prevention efforts has been steadily reduced in recent years in support of school-based budgeting and the emphasis on grading school performance. Even with these prevention efforts, in more than half of Florida’s school districts, 30% or higher of the students in secondary programs are removed from their regularly assigned academic classes and enter the “funnel” of ISS and/or OSS programs. This rate should be less than 15% of the secondary school population.



The second level within the continuum includes in-school proactive programs. In these programs students with potential for displaying disruptive behaviors or those with a history of minor infractions are given specific interventions to redirect their behavior and increase their academic performance.

Even with proactive programs, some students may become disruptive and require consequences. In-school reactive programs at the third continuum level provide further interventions within the school for these students to channel their behavior into appropriate outlets. More severe violations may be addressed through reactive programs conducted off of the school campus. These programs should be last resort alternatives.

Seven basic tenets underlying the Continuum are explicated below:

- 1. The goal of the Continuum and of school districts and schools is to keep students in school.** The goal of the Continuum and of school districts and schools should be to keep students in school learning. The Continuum encourages districts and schools to provide the least restrictions possible on the academic progress of the students by addressing the root causes of the aberrant behavior. Districts should strive to keep children in settings most conducive to learning with the least possible restrictions and seclusions.
- 2. Districts should strive to be proactive rather than reactive.** Districts and schools should be proactive in implementing programs and interventions that will keep students behaving appropriately instead of waiting for violations to occur or aberrant behaviors to appear resulting in punishment. Proactive programs are less expensive and less damaging academically and emotionally to students. Proactive programs place the school in a positive, assistive mode instead of in an enforcer role. The first and most effective step to reduce the number of students referred for discipline problems that result in suspension is to institute consistent and effective school-wide and targeted prevention programs.
- 3. An effective and comprehensive system for reducing out-of-school suspensions must address the root causes of the unacceptable behaviors exhibited by students.** Effective programs and interventions are built on a recognition of the root causes of behavior violations. The major root causes are:
 - a. Academic failure
 - b. Emotional distress
 - c. Family/parent issues
 - d. Possible/evident drug use/abuse
 - e. Legal/criminal issues

Students who are not successful academically often become disruptive to gain attention and compensate for academic failure. Students with emotional issues and problems often do not succeed academically, increasing their levels of frustration and tendency to act out. Some students come from families with issues such as poverty, divorce, domestic violence, and/or drug addiction that contribute to the student's inability to concentrate in school as well as anger toward others. Some students begin using drugs because of these root causes or the drug use then amplifies academic and behavioral problems. All of these issues may be complicated through legal and criminal involvement such as charges for drug use, battery from fighting, and more serious offenses. These multiple root causes are often interrelated and contribute to a downward spiral of discipline problems and denial of academic opportunities that lead to more frustration and discipline problems. Simply punishing students for violating codes of conduct does not address the root causes. Escalating levels of violations require increasing attention to and addressing of the root causes for the disruptive behavior.

- 4. Inclusion of key components will increase the effectiveness of alternative programs.** Across the myriad of programs and interventions reviewed, several key components were associated with effective programs. These key components include:
 - a. Instituting proactive intervention for small groups of targeted students with predictive potential for future discipline problems.
 - b. Implementing individual and/or small group counseling within any of the targeted programs as an effective intervention.
 - c. Using behavior specialists working in schools on redirecting behaviors of students prior to the behaviors becoming severe.
 - d. Developing and implementing strong parent involvement at all levels in which parents participate and are a part of the interventions, not just signing papers and providing transportation to allow students to participate in alternative programs.
 - e. Assuring good teachers and good teaching in all classrooms, regardless of the level of restriction

- 5. The Continuum varies by level of school and level of restriction/removal from regular classroom setting.** The Continuum recognizes the increasing levels of program intensity by level of school (elementary and secondary) and by level of restriction/removal from regular classroom setting (least to most). In-school and out-of-school suspension are used less frequently in elementary schools than in secondary schools, with most discipline issues at the elementary level being handled through short-term administrative processes rather than removal of students from classrooms. In the Continuum, the levels progress from the least restrictive programs and interventions at the top of the Continuum to the most restrictive as students progress deeper into the disciplinary system.

- 6. Decisions on programs and student participation must be driven by data.** A major underlying assumption of the Continuum is that the most effective district systems for addressing discipline issues are those in which decisions are driven by data. Some excellent comprehensive data collection systems were identified across the state in which discipline infractions are tracked by type of student behaviors, time of offense, and location of offense. One noteworthy system is the School Wide Information and Support System (SWISS). These systems assist administrators in pinpointing when and where most discipline problems occur so that proactive changes can be made that will reduce the incidents. Some districts are also using a matrix of offenses and consequences that systematizes the process of determining what alternatives are most appropriate actions for school administrators to take when a student misbehaves.
- 7. The Continuum may be represented by a funnel depicting the increased intensity of services needed at the lower portion of the funnel.** The Continuum is represented visually by a funnel, portraying the negative consequences of losing the academic and economic potential of students through the disciplinary system. It is in the best interest of school systems and the state to narrow the funnel as much as possible to keep all students in school learning. The Continuum proposes that school-wide prevention programs should address and eliminate disciplinary issues for at least 80% of the students. Initial proactive programs should address at least 15% more, so that reactive programs will be needed for 5% or less of the students. Fewer than 2% of students should be removed from their school settings. It is recognized that some students may have emotional problems far more severe than can be solved within the public school setting. Special strategies and programs may be needed for students placed in exceptional student education programs for emotionally disturbed students and for adjudicated students.

The remainder of the full report presents and discusses in detail the intervention strategies and programs that are appropriate for use in Florida public schools as alternatives to out-of-school suspension. The major Continuum Levels form the organization for these discussions:

- ◆ School-wide prevention programs
- ◆ Inschool proactive programs
- ◆ Inschool reactive programs
- ◆ Off-site reactive programs
- ◆ Out-of-school suspension

Recommendations

This two-year study has shown that although many districts continue to use traditional punishment models for consequence disruptive and unacceptable student behavior, a growing number have moved beyond this mind set to more proactive interventions. Based on the data collected and the site visits and interviews conducted in this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. The Department should continue to promote and support school districts in identifying and implementing proactive methods of dealing with disruptive student behaviors. Changing the climate in schools by directing both adult and student behavior to a focus on solutions rather than punishments is paying off for many schools.
2. The Department should disseminate information on the Continuum and this conceptual framework for encouraging proactive interventions and services to all school districts.
3. Districts and schools should be encouraged to use a formal matrix of offenses by level to determine consequences and types of intervention.
4. The Department should make information and training about software packages such as SWISS readily available to schools so that schools can increase their use of data-driven and proactive decision making concerning improving school climate and reducing disruptive behaviors.
5. The Department should generate a flag or flags in the state data system that will allow districts and schools to note participation in specific ISS programs that will facilitate individual and longitudinal tracking by program and outcome measures.
6. The functional behavior analysis model and student intervention teams as methods of identifying student behavioral issues should be promoted and supported among principals of all schools.
7. The Department should conduct additional studies to identify more effective methods for reducing corporal punishment in public schools.
8. The DOE should generate a detailed analysis of the relative costs of the types of programs in the continuum and disseminate the results to districts as incentives for funding the less costly prevention and early intervention options.
9. The Department should conduct surveys of all public schools to establish a sound database on the components and structures of alternatives to out-of-school suspension upon which to base future state policies in this needed area of improvement.
10. Greater efforts should be made at all levels to involve parents in the solutions to disruptive and unacceptable behaviors in schools.

For a .pdf copy of the full report, refer to the publications section of the Evaluation Systems Design, Inc. website at <http://www.esdi.cc/>. For further information concerning the complete study, contact Dr. Constance C. Bergquist at Evaluation Systems Design, Inc. (esdi@talstar.com or 850-893-9504).