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HOW SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION CONTRIBUTE TO DROPPING OUT

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In-School and Alternative Programs Are Better

From Educational Horizons

THE forces which lead students to give up on school are well known: unhappy or broken homes, poverty and limited parental education, low reading and mathematics achievement, academic retention, etc. Suspensions and expulsions tend to speed up the dropping out process. Being suspended or expelled is one of the top three school-related reasons for dropping out. And students who have been suspended or had trouble with the police are much more likely to drop out.

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According to one estimate, dropouts have five times as many serious discipline incidents as students who do not drop out. A study of educational disruption in Florida showed that the typical disruptive student who is likely to drop out or be suspended or expelled was a black male; had a low sixth-grade achievement score, a low overall gradepoint average, and a low verbal aptitude score; and had not been referred for psychological services. The authors conclude that expulsions appear to be linked to racial and social status discrimination.

School pushouts and dismissals through suspensions and expulsions appear to be the results of school enrollment patterns, demographics, student backgrounds and attitudes, and school and teacher expectations. (The term "pushout" describes at-risk students who continually receive signals from their schools that they are neither able nor worthy to continue to graduation and who are frequently encouraged to leave.)

According to one study, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may very early become convinced that the educational process "will eventually relegate them to the unsatisfying work status of their parents, regardless of their cognitive ... characteristics." Low grades and ethnicity may lead to low aspirations and a miserable self-esteem.

Lisa Beck and Joseph A. Muia suggest that "the lower-class child is neither willing nor able to conform to the school's middle-class standards of obedience, docility, and scholarship" and that the student's language, morals, attitudes, and ideals are unacceptable in our schools. Receiving poor marks and having to repeat a grade create feelings of alienation and low esteem; disciplinary problems tend to result. Such behavior is usually a strong indicator that a student is about to quit school.

Some research data suggest that suspensions also result from school climate. Schools with high suspension rates have clear disciplinary policies emphasizing standards or controls rather than instruction, community involvement, and student-centered environments.

As a consequence, working-class and poor youths and blacks and Hispanics across social classes become resisters who are unwilling to accommodate to a hidden curriculum that does not fit their needs. Suspensions occur when the school or school principal decides that the school will not abide these students any longer. Of course, a principal responds to the teachers in the school. In one school, it was not unusual for four or five teachers to recommend as many as 80 percent of the school's total suspensions.

Many teachers hold disproportionately negative or low expectations of at-risk students.

This sends signals to at-risk students that they are neither able nor worthy to continue through graduation. School rejection creates student rejection.

Harassment by school personnel as a result of cultural and personality conflicts and other personal biases forces many students to drop out. Many school principals have a tendency to discharge "overage" students as soon as they reach the legal age limit. When presented with the option of withdrawal or suspension, many students are advised that their suspension would jeopardize their chances for re-entry the following year. Given these options, students typically elect to withdraw.

School pushouts tend to be a subgroup of the dropout population. Many have similar characteristics, such as low reading and math achievement in the early grades, early academic retention, broken or unhappy homes, undereducated parents, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and minority or ethnic origin. Most frequently, they are male. The limited school readiness of these students in the early grades, together with the demands of an increased lock-step curriculum and limited teacher assistance in overcoming learning hurdles, sets the stage for retention.

Students who are held back a grade are more likely to drop out than those who have never been held back. As a result, the school maintains and, in fact, may even create misfits who get increasingly out of step, begin to feel and act like failures, frequently act out or become truant, come into direct conflict with the school or its policies, and soon find themselves thrust into society unprepared both educationally and vocationally to meet societal expectations.

The Supreme Court decision in *Lopez v. Williams* held that most students who are suspended respond in one or more of the following ways: They lose their self-esteem, feel powerless and helpless, view school principals and teachers with resentment and suspicion, learn to withdraw, and feel stigmatized by teachers, administrators, and parents. Punishment by suspension also means that the student's real problems go unidentified and unaddressed and, instead, assigns all responsibility to the student.

The educational needs of these students can be better met, not by suspensions or expulsions, but rather through the creation of alternative schools. In 1987, the Council of Chief State School Officers identified four policies to assure school success for students at risk, the first being that "there must be an equitable opportunity for each person to earn a high school diploma at public expense." This means finding alternatives to suspension and expulsion.

The in-school suspension and alternative school approaches have been increasingly favored as more educationally sound than out-of-school suspension. One study found that students who were suspended in school dropped out or failed significantly less than students in out-of-school suspension programs. The in-school or alternative program offers the expelled or suspended student an opportunity to continue with formal education, while the out-of-school suspension suspends both learning and attendance.

These programs must attend to rehabilitation as well as order and control, however. Successful intervention programs include four common characteristics: (1) Potential dropouts or pushouts are separated from other students and placed in special programs; (2) strong vocational components, including practical, job-related skills, are built in; (3) out-of-class learning, often connected with paid employment, is scheduled; and (4) individualized instruction and considerably more individual and group counseling are critical components.

The best programs are nonpunitive ones, since additional punishment for students who are already alienated simply creates hostility and does not adequately address students' real problems. These are also designed to help each student by identifying and remedying the factors that contributed to the discipline and academic problems; then they provide caring, personalized, individualized assistance to each student at an appropriate level of academic and psychological functioning. Preferably, parents are involved in developing and carrying out each student's individualized program.

School officials have a legal obligation to keep students in school. The Supreme Court in *Goss v. Lopez* clearly states that students facing suspension have both property and liberty rights under the Fourteenth Amendment. By providing free public education and compelling school attendance, schools must meet the requirements of due process prior to suspension. Rights are assumed to be violated also because a suspension or expulsion could impair a student's reputation.

Procedural rights include an informal meeting with the disciplinarian in which the reasons for the proposed disciplinary action are explained and the student is given the right to respond. If the exclusions are beyond seven to 10 days, a more formal hearing is required.

Because expulsion denies a student educational rights, the courts require that this decision involve the school board in strict due process which includes a hearing before an impartial fact finder and gives the student an opportunity to confront, cross-examine, and present witnesses and to be represented by legal counsel. Expulsions or indefinite

suspensions should be initiated only for behavior which threatens people's physical safety or disrupts the school's educational function; expulsion should not be used unless students have prior knowledge that their action is a violation of school rules. A student's claim to a protected interest in school attendance can no longer be questioned. Many courts have decided that exclusion from school denies students the state-created right to an education.

Each state's laws must spell out the specific procedures that schools are to use. Each school board can now be held liable in cases where the board knows that the constitutional rights of students were violated. Penalties for student conduct must remain within the authority delegated by state legislation to the school board. The manner or procedure used to suspend or expel is what frequently leads to litigation, however. The principle of equity must be observed to ensure that students' rights are not violated.

Although the relationship between being suspended or expelled and dropping out has not been carefully examined, current literature provides ample evidence that such acts hurry the dropout process. The courts clearly hold that school-age children have both property and liberty rights to public education and that our schools must follow due process or face litigation. What most schools and school systems have found most useful is nonpunitive and facilitative in-school suspension or, if necessary, the provision of an alternative school. Either option is oriented toward helping the student to become involved in the learning process positively through successful experiences.

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By Lawrence M. DeRidder

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