

School Safety

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U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice

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discipline (dys'ə plīn), *n.*, *v.*, *-pline*
1. training to act in accordance with rule
discipline. 2. instruction and exercise



Pepperdine University's National School Safety Center is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education. NSSC's goal is to promote safe schools free of drug traffic and abuse, gangs, weapons, vandalism and bullying; to encourage good discipline, attendance and community support; and to help ensure a quality education for all children.

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About the cover:

Discipline, or more accurately, the lack of, is identified as the root of many of our schools' problems. Only drugs in schools concern the public more. Illustration by Karen Watson.

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BY JACKSON TOBY AND ADAM SCRUPSKI

The struggle to maintain order in schools without inflicting "harsh punishments" may be balanced by providing community service as an option for offenders.

Community service as alternative discipline

The 350-page report to the Congress, *Violent Schools — Safe Schools* (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1978), contained mountains of data bearing on the causes of violence and vandalism in American public schools and on possible remedies. For instance, thousands of students, teachers and principals were asked their opinions about countermeasures: "If a school had a problem with personal attacks, theft and property destruction, what could be done to make it safer?" Interestingly enough, the most frequent response of all three groups — students, teachers and principals — was some variation of "stricter discipline." But what did respondents mean by "stricter discipline?"

Probably most students and some teachers and principals meant traditional punishments: visiting physically and symbolically unpleasant humiliations on offenders to make them regret their transgressions. This punitive emphasis was actually in place in many schools; 14 percent of the big-city schools and 42

percent of the schools in rural areas used "paddling" in 1976, when the study was conducted. Certainly 19th-century educator William C. Bagley meant traditional punishments when he recommended to a young teacher to "pile penalty upon penalty for misdemeanors and let the 'sting' of each penalty be double that of its predecessor" (Waller, 1932).¹

However, when teachers and principals today speak of "discipline," they often mean something else. They refer to "effective classroom management" and imply that the art of good classroom management can prevent discipline problems from arising in the first place. In a sense, a teacher who complains about discipline problems in the classroom labels himself or herself as a poor manager.

Yet this newly fashionable way that educators think about discipline does not change the fact that hundreds of thousands of instances of rule violations occur in American schools — some minor, some very serious. What do teachers and principals do about them? For relatively minor infractions, there are reprimands, after-school detention and in-school suspension. For serious infractions, there are transfers to alternative schools, suspensions and, very rarely, expulsions. The most frequent response to serious infractions — suspension — has been under suspicion as pointless in light of the classroom management philosophy. If students are chronically truant, what

sense is there in suspending them? They obviously don't want to be in school anyway. If students do not apply themselves to schoolwork and apply themselves instead to mischief, doesn't suspension increase their marginal relationship to the curriculum? Suspension seems irrational if the goal is to rehabilitate the offender.

One recent appraisal of school discipline speaks of both suspension and corporal punishment as "blatantly inhuman" disciplinary techniques (Radin, 1988). Another sees suspension as a "backstage" way of dealing with difficult children in urban schools by excluding them (Tropea, 1987). Still another sees suspension as "capital punishment for misdemeanors" (Comerford and Jacobson, 1987). Professional condemnations of suspension provide support for the public suspicion of suspension as the stigmatization of child and family, which, of course, it is. And in almost every study where parental preferences were investigated, parents preferred less drastic sanctions to suspensions.

Even as a response to violent offenses, suspension has fallen into disrepute. After all, suspension turns deviance-prone youth loose in the community — unsupervised. Consequently, it may increase the likelihood of further damage to the community. Furthermore, data show racial disproportionality in suspension, thus suggesting a special dysfunction of suspension for minority-group youth most in need of the

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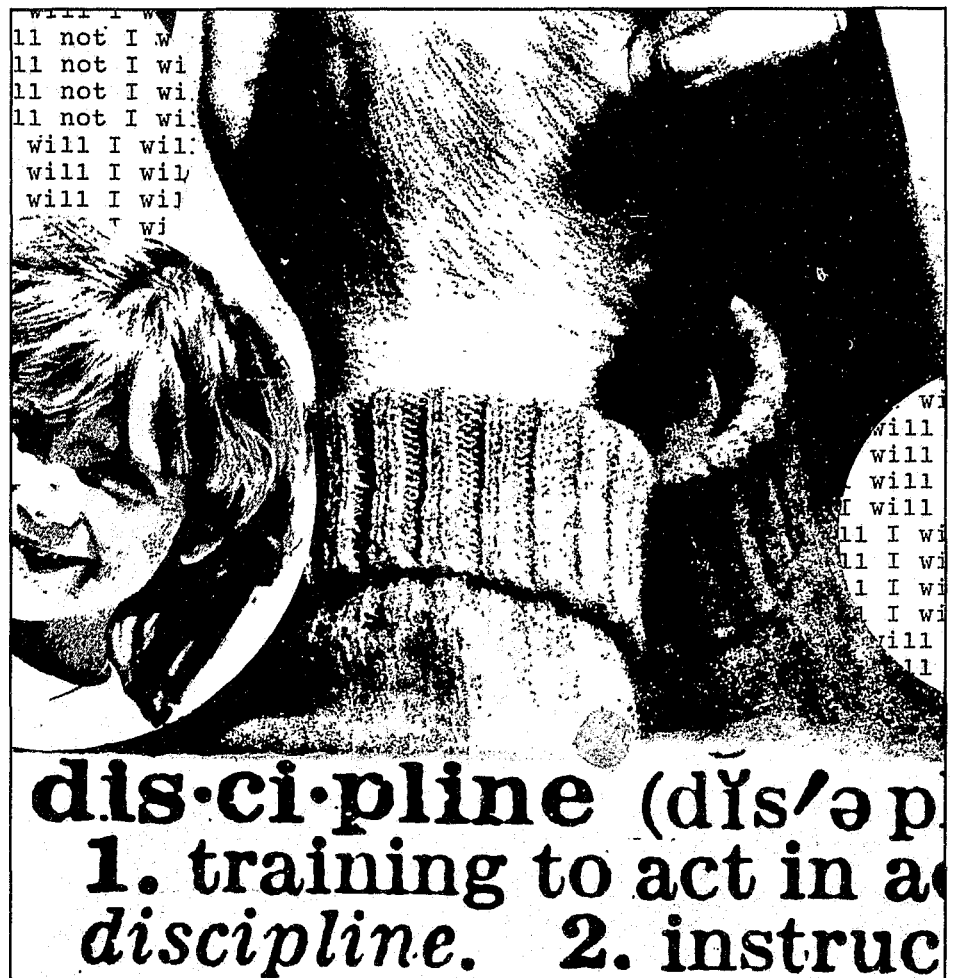
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continuous service of schools.

These appraisals ignore the empirical effects of suspension on suspended students and on the rest of the school community. Although the academic achievement of suspended students may be lowered by their suspensions, it is likely that suspension delivers an effective symbolic message to the offender. The message is that the school, as the official representative of the local community, has temporarily given up on the student. To be suspended is to become a temporary pariah. Who wants that? We hypothesize that most rule violators do not want it and that their parents want it even less. What is at stake for them is not only education but also membership in the community, including membership in the peer community.

The community's connection to suspension from school is revealed in the locus of the authority to suspend students. Classroom teachers may reprimand or detain misbehaving pupils, but in most school districts only the principal or a surrogate responsible for behavior in the school as a whole may suspend. Thus, principals or their surrogates suspend in cases of failure of teacher-employed sanctions; in cases where the classroom offense is serious enough that the more moderate teacher sanctions are insufficient; or in cases where the offense occurs in the school at large, for example, in corridors or lavatories. Although in practice the school tends to "go it alone" in its administration of suspensions, the community is the ultimate authority in depriving a child of the right to attend school through suspension. In New Jersey, for instance, the board of education must be notified each month of every suspension.

The camouflaging of the community as the ultimate order-maintaining authority in disciplinary suspensions is one reason why suspensions have come to be viewed suspiciously. If those responsible for order in the school could devise some sanction that would represent the community in its demand for conforming behavior, order would be easier to main-



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tain. It will be suggested that "coerced community service," unlike suspension, is more likely to be perceived by students as a community response to misbehavior than ordinary school sanctions, including suspensions.

Sanctions for student misbehavior

Disciplinary sanctions have been part of the history and culture of schools from the start of compulsory education. The word *discipline*, almost as familiar a term as *recess* and *graduation*, has traditionally implied punitive consequences for misbehavior. Although *punishment* is not often spoken of explicitly, punishment under other names — such as *assertive discipline* — has continued to be of interest, for example, in recent schemes of graduated penalties from verbal correction, through timeouts, and then detention. In any case, the concurrent search for alternatives to suspension — the school's ultimate sanction — suggests that assertive discipline is not a very effective solution to school disci-

plinary problems.

Punishment as a response to student misbehavior has two implications — one for the offender and one for conforming students. For the offender, it constitutes an attempt to stop his misbehavior; getting his "just desserts" demonstrates to him the futility of his deviance.² Punishment is intended as a preliminary response to the punished individual's return to conformity. For the group, punishment has consequences for the morale of conformists; it protects the normative system of school rules and regulations by making the offender unenviable (Toby, 1964, 1981). Unfortunately, neither of these functions of punitive school discipline has received much research attention.

Robert Slavin (1986) reports that "many studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of certain mild punishments for reducing inappropriate behavior." Slavin is referring to studies in which teachers administer such sanctions as five-minute detentions and "timeouts" as

behavior-modification strategies operating to inhibit interruptions in the flow of instructional activity. Despite the widespread use of suspension, a thrusting out of the offending student from the school community, and the contemporary controversy surrounding its use, research on the effectiveness of suspension is surprisingly uncommon.

The problem at the school level is to locate an effective second line of defense against serious student misbehavior if and when prevention fails. Formerly, suspension was that second line of defense. It was considered demonstrative of the futility of misbehavior and sufficiently protective of the normative system.

Some studies show that suspension is still regarded as appropriate by some constituencies of many public schools. For example, Bordenick (1976) found that the majority of students, teachers, parents and administrators believed that suspension increased respect for the teacher, that it affected the behavior of other students, and that a prohibition of the use of suspension would limit teacher effectiveness. And Stallworth (1978) found that in a large Michigan city school system suspension was considered a positive disciplinary measure by both teachers and administrators.

However, as a penalty for truancy and class cutting (both serious problems in many schools today), suspension seems to many to constitute overkill. But if suspension is to be de-emphasized, what other disciplinary measures are appropriate? Critics of suspension offer two less punitive alternatives — in-school suspension and alternative school placement. Comprehensive research into these two alternatives, however, is rare and sometimes of dubious quality. Daniel Duke summarizes research conducted by school districts concerning the consequences of their own in-school suspension programs. All but two of these studies used as indicants only teacher, student or parent *perceptions*; not surprisingly, they reported beneficial consequences of in-school suspension. In such

cases, given the district's investment in the plan, Duke's cautious words are, if anything, an understatement: "It is likely that many [district-conducted] evaluations tend to portray results in as positive a manner as possible."

Concurrent with the growing use of in-school suspension is another approach to serious discipline cases: transfer to an alternative school. Alternative schools, which at the time of their inception in the 1970s recruited various kinds of non-conformist and even "creative" students, in more recent years seem increasingly to house a more disruptive student clientele. Nevertheless, research on these schools finds their students more appreciative of their alternative school setting than they were of conventional schools and, in most cases, better behaved than they were previously.

On the surface, alternative schools appear to be a good idea for chronically disruptive students whose confirmed deviance requires more individualized treatment and a less crowded setting. Alternative schools are more informally organized than traditional schools. Even if the student-teacher ratio is not much lower than that of the conventional school, the reduced numbers, as has been demonstrated in day-care studies, seem to make possible a more relaxed situation in which teachers can relate more personally to students. Although one recent study reports waning enthusiasm for alternative schools (Cabbage, 1986), others have reported alternative schools in existence for more than 10 and, in one case, 15 years (Smith, Gregory and Pugh, 1981).

An effective program to cope with student misbehavior must come to grips with the seriousness of the triggering offenses as well as the question of backup sanctions. The disciplinary response should include a range of sanctions, from scoldings, detention and in-school suspensions to more severe sanctions designed to discourage the offender's deviant career and to make him unenviable as a role model. In-school suspensions and alternative school placements may

have been intended to achieve these objectives, but whether they are perceived as in the same range as out-of-school suspensions, expulsions and referral to the juvenile court is doubtful. A tougher in-school sanction may make possible less reliance on these out-of-school responses while at the same time expressing strong enough disapproval to deter.

The problem of maintaining order

Sensitivity to children's rights makes suspension of students, even of violent students, less easy than it used to be (U.S. Supreme Court, 1975; Toby, 1980, 1983). Expulsion of students, especially younger students, is rare. And enrollment in alternative schools tends to be quasi-voluntary. From some points of view, schools have become more humane. But there has been a cost.

However undesirable punitive and summary discipline might have been from a human rights standpoint, it helped teachers and principals to maintain an orderly, albeit authoritarian, school environment. It has been argued that schools have loosened up too much and that constitutional requirements for the protection of children's rights can be met by an on-the-spot inquiry which enables the student to present a defense, if there is one, thus preserving the system of strict discipline by using short suspensions.

However, the actual legal requirements produced by the recent emphasis on children's rights is not the main source of the weakening of school discipline. What weakens the administration of disciplinary action — moderate or severe — are the rational or irrational fears aroused in administrators about possible legal action in defense of children's rights. Though Lufner points out that courts uphold the school more often than not in contested discipline decisions, he also admits that information concerning cases where courts do not uphold the school circulates more pervasively among school personnel than does knowledge of court decisions supporting strict discipline. Perhaps because schools are

"domesticated organizations" (Carlson, 1964), school personnel tend to exaggerate the threat of court intervention on behalf of children.

The school's ability to expel or suspend on behalf of the larger community has eroded; many youngsters who formerly would have been extruded from schools are now left in them. For some teachers and principals, this is tantamount to an abdication of discipline. Despite a continuing resort to suspension — if not to expulsion — in the face of mounting school behavior problems, not all of which require a drastic response, suspensions seem inadequate to the task.

Some critics of the public schools have complained that suspension is overused, and, if they are right, it is because, between detention and suspension, schools have precious little in the way of a disciplinary sanction. In order to control their most unruly students, schools need disciplinary options intermediate in severity between after-school detention or in-school suspension and long-term suspension or expulsion. Furthermore, such an intermediate sanction would be more effective if it demonstrated to the misbehaving student that he has offended not just school authorities but the collectivity of community members as well.

School-juvenile court collaboration

One possibility is for the school to collaborate with a community agency, the juvenile justice system, in dealing with the most serious cases of school crime: youngsters accused of assaulting fellow students or teachers, of selling or using drugs in the school building, of extorting money from fellow students, or of committing major vandalism. In theory, they do so now. But juvenile courts, like the schools, lack an intermediate punishment. They must choose between an extremely punitive response, incarceration in a juvenile correctional facility, and lesser penalties such as juvenile probation, sometimes accompanied by "diversion" into rehabilitative programs or fines. The fines often are uncollectible.

Overburdened by a large volume of cases, some very serious, the juvenile courts, understandably, tend to avoid incarceration as a response to school misbehavior. As a result, few offenders at school are removed from the community and, therefore, from the schools. Many return to the school where the offense took place, despite adjudication as delinquent in the juvenile court, with what seems to them a negligible disciplinary response from both the juvenile justice system and from school authorities.

A visible and appropriately powerful disciplinary response would be desirable from the standpoint both of nipping the offender's deviant tendencies in the bud and of deterring *other* youngsters from following his bad example. Can the juvenile justice system and the school district *together* develop an intermediate punishment for serious disciplinary infractions that neither has been able to develop alone?

Suppose that when youngsters are referred to juvenile court, one option considered by the court is to offer adjudicated delinquents the chance to return to school and work off the offense by doing onerous manual labor under supervision of school authorities. Since the offense was committed in school, it might be appropriate for the restitution to occur in school. However, the school would have to have a coerced community service program in place and be willing to accept into it fairly serious offenders. In short, each case would be handled by negotiation between the juvenile court and the school district. In some cases, the school might not want to take the youngster; in others, the judge might prefer to impose a stiff fine, paid not by the parents of the youngster but by the youngster himself through the proceeds of weekend and other part-time employment monitored by probation officers attached to court (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1981). For those youngsters who claim to be unable to find remunerative employment by means of which to fulfill this requirement or who would prefer to be pun-

ished by school authorities, the school-based community service option would give the judge an alternative.

Community service as a disciplinary disposition in the school might consist of weekend supervised work within a school building — cleaning, polishing, painting — or of similar service in the local community supervised by school employees. Once coerced community service exists, not all participants need to come from those convicted of target offenses in the juvenile court. The school also could offer coerced community service as an alternative to short suspensions in cases that are very serious from the school's point of view, such as defying teacher authority, but which may be treated as less serious by the juvenile court.

Conclusion

Punishment is still a naughty word in educational circles. Although such schemes as "assertive discipline," the administration of a schedule of graduated punishments, may be useful as a classroom management tool, what happens on occasions when the "timeouts," detentions and in-school suspensions prove ineffective? Our impression is that the current wisdom in schools of education does not prepare new teachers adequately for this eventuality.

Coerced community service as a punishment is a new version of an old approach: the expression of penitence for misdeeds. Perhaps it will help make schools more orderly and, therefore, better places in which teachers can teach and students can learn. In addition, considering a negative sanction such as coerced community service may be in itself constructive for education professionals. It would help make the investigation of punishment to maintain school discipline intellectually respectable. □

Endnotes

1. For complete citations used in this article, see O.C. Moles, ed., *Student Discipline Strategies: Research and Practice* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990).
2. Our use of masculine pronouns (instead of the gender neutral *his* or *her* or some alternation of the two) reflects less stylistic custom than the tendency for suspendees still to be predominantly male.