



**COUNCIL FOR CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS**  
*A Division of The Council for Exceptional Children*

**SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES FOR  
STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANTLY DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR**

by

The Executive Committee of  
The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders

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**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to identify the position of the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD) related to school discipline policies for students with significantly disruptive behavior, regardless of the student's disability. It is intended to replace and supersede an earlier CCBD position paper that dealt with this same topic:

Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders. (1990). Position paper on school discipline policies for students with significantly disruptive behavior. Behavioral Disorders, 15, 57-61.

## **SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES FOR STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANTLY DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR**

Although schools continually face new challenges, one challenge has remained constant: addressing challenging behavior, or “discipline” problems. In recent history we have seen several approaches to school discipline ranging from a hands-off model in which the goal is to let children “develop” into responsible citizens, to the recent “get tough” and “zero tolerance” approaches that primarily rely on excluding from the school environment children and youth who engage in challenging behavior. What both of these extremes have in common is that there is a lack of compelling evidence that they change student behavior; that is, no evidence shows that either approach results in significantly improved student outcomes. In fact, the exclusionary approaches associated with zero tolerance have documented negative collateral effects, including school dropout, increased rates of disruption, and the fact that minorities are likely to be disproportionately affected by such policies. Add to the mix the confusion and often times misunderstanding surrounding federal mandates associated with children and youth with disabilities, and it is understandable why schools continue to struggle with challenging behavior.

What we do know about school discipline is that there are no simple, easy “cookbook” solutions. We also know that effective discipline practices will benefit all children and youth, not just those with disabilities. Therefore, the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders believes that “discipline” should be viewed as a problem solving process that leads to student social and academic success. Further, the process should be developed to reflect local district and school needs, but must a) incorporate empirically validated practices; b) limit the amount of time students are removed from learning environments; c) emphasize an instructional approach; d) focus on increasing appropriate behavior, as opposed to simply decreasing or punishing problem

behavior; and, e) build policies and procedures within the school to support appropriate behavior in all students.

This paper provides an overview of the current knowledge-base regarding promising practices to assist schools in developing discipline systems that are more likely to lead to improved social and academic behavior, and includes recommendations for schools and policy makers on these issues. Similar to recommendations made in an earlier position paper (Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 1990), the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders maintains a focus on developing policies, strategies, and systems to support all students, not just those with emotional or behavioral disorders and other disabilities. School districts are encouraged to adopt common procedural steps for all students related to discipline that meet the standards established by case law and statute for students with disabilities. These procedures emphasize fairness and objective decision-making that is intended to bring about improvements in behavior while maintaining education. While not all children and youth will be able to learn in the same environment, no child should be excluded from education altogether. To make this feasible, schools are encouraged to adopt an array of possible alternative learning environments which might be used with students who are unable to be maintained in their typical classroom setting, and to adopt evidence-based practices that may prevent removal in the first place or lessen the likelihood that students engage in future problem behavior.

### **Background and Statement of Concern**

The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders has three primary concerns with respect to discipline for children and youth with Emotional / Behavioral Disorders (EBD). The first is the continued over-reliance of exclusionary practices in an attempt to reduce problem behavior. Second, is the limited use of consistent preventative approaches that have been

demonstrated to be effective in the reduction of problem behavior. Third, is the lack of implementation of strategies that have been shown to be most likely to bring about change a student's behavior once that child has demonstrated behavior subject to disciplinary action.

Research to date focusing on students with chronic patterns of challenging behavior indicates that school-based punishment practices alone do not reduce rates of problem behavior (e.g., Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998; Gottfredson, 1997; Lipsey & Wilson, 1993; Mayer, 1995; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Tolan & Guerra, 1994; Walker et al., 1996). In fact, reliance on exclusionary and punishment-centered disciplinary practices without pro-active supports has been shown to increase problem behavior (e.g., Mayer, 1995).

The problem is that traditional approaches to discipline are based on theories that are applicable to some students, but are flawed with respect to students who exhibit chronic behavior problems. One of the underlying theories of discipline practices such as exclusion is that students' behavior is primarily driven and maintained by the principles of positive reinforcement. The assumption is that school is a reinforcing environment, and therefore if we remove students from this reinforcing environment, students will not engage in problem behavior so that they are not removed from school.

A more viable theory, based on much current research of children's early learning histories, has shown that the problem behavior of many students including some students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders or other disabilities is maintained by the principles of negative reinforcement (e.g., Gunter, Denny, Jack, Shores, & Nelson, 1993; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Shores, Jack, Gunter, Ellis, DeBriere, & Wehby, 1993). That is, academic tasks, teacher interactions, and even the overall school environment are viewed as aversive, and students engage in disruptive behavior to escape these aversive situations. It is the disconnect between current school

disciplinary practices and student learning history that, in effect, render any punitive disciplinary approach ineffective with children and youth who display chronic patterns of problem behavior. A further concern with the over-reliance of exclusionary and punishment based practices is the potential for lost learning opportunities, and that students feel unwelcome at school resulting in being “pushed out” of continued participation in schooling.

### **Discipline – Making it Work**

The term “discipline” has typically been linked with negative or punishing consequences designed to reduce problem behavior when used within the context of schools. However the Council for Children with Behavior Disorders strongly encourages school districts to move beyond traditional "punishment" types of discipline and instead focus on a much broader view that emphasizes supporting and increasing appropriate behavior. Discipline is therefore viewed as a set of positively stated expectations accompanied by teaching strategies and district and school-wide supports to ensure that all students can be successful (i.e., meet the stated expectations).

The Council for Children with Behavior Disorders advocates that districts create a unified discipline policy with a shared set of positively stated expectations for all students, including those with disabilities, designed to promote safe and orderly learning environments. Simply setting expectations in and of itself is not sufficient for success. Once expectations are set, educators should consider the following:

- a) Ensure that the school or district has a plan to teach the necessary social skills to enable all students to meet these expectations, including students with disabilities.
- b) Verify that the school or district has a plan that reflects current evidence-based best practices and legal policies to address the needs of those students who do not respond to general discipline strategies.

c) Ensure that a plan is in place for access to professional development and technical assistance when current policies and practices fail to promote student success.

### **Prevention**

Outlined below are the minimal features recommended for the development of positive school-wide systems that focus on the prevention and early intervention of problem behavior:

1. Schools should draft a clear statement of purpose that focuses on both academic and social outcomes for all students and include the faculty, staff, and parents' roles.
2. Schools should develop a short set (no more than about 5) of clearly defined, positively stated expected behaviors (e.g. positively stated rules). For each expectation, clear and specific behavioral examples should be provided.
3. Schools should develop procedures for teaching expected behavior. Expectations should be taught throughout the school year and embedded across the curriculum.
4. Schools should develop procedures for encouraging expected behavior. The critical component at this level is to provide students with multiple opportunities to receive specific feedback for appropriate behavior. At minimum, school personnel should provide specific verbal feedback when students display appropriate social skills related to school-wide expectations. However, it may be necessary to plan other forms of positive feedback for appropriate behaviors, especially for students who have histories of school-based behavior problems.
5. Schools should develop procedures for discouraging problem behavior. Schools should review and revise current discipline policies to a) provide clear definitions of infractions, b) determine which behaviors should be managed in the classroom and which should be sent to the office, and c) develop data-based decision rules to ensure

appropriate strategies are used with students who frequently receive administrative action as a result of problem behavior. For example, if a student needs to be removed from the classroom for a disciplinary action three times for the same offense, a team may be convened to develop alternative, more effective management and discipline strategies.

6. Schools should develop procedures for record-keeping and decision making. Sources of data for decisions can include surveys, teacher anecdotal information, student evaluations, parent reports, office referrals, and discipline reports. In addition to developing formative and summative data collection systems, schools should use that data to make informed decisions about overall discipline effectiveness, and adjust discipline systems as needed.
7. Schools should involve parents and families through activities such as disseminating information regarding school expectations and specific social skills being addressed, inviting parents to serve on behavior committees, and involving families in the development and implementation of individual student Positive Behavior Support plans.
8. Schools should develop discipline systems that reflect and respond to the cultural, language, and ethnic make-up of the community in which the school resides. Increasingly, there is greater disconnection between student learning histories and the learning histories and subsequent expectations of a fairly homogeneous education work-force. That is, the school experiences, especially school-based reinforcers, of middle-class Anglo educators may have little similarity to the school experiences and reinforcers (or lack thereof) of poor and/or minority students. All educators and

families can agree on larger behavioral expectations such as "respect." However, there are several ways one can demonstrate respect. The differing behavioral patterns that are often influenced by culture and language should be factored in and become part of the continuum of the larger system of instruction and disciplinary parameters.

In working with children and youth with chronic behavior problems, a team of educators and other professionals is usually required to develop and implement appropriate educational and behavior change plans. Schools are encouraged to develop a similar team approach to design, implement, and evaluate school-wide discipline systems and prevention strategies. Essential to success, the building administrator must serve on and provide leadership to this team (Sugai et al., 2000). Grade level or subject area representatives, specialists, and parents and community members should make up the remainder of the team. We believe that by using a school team-based approach to discipline, schools can a) develop expertise across a variety of educators in the area of effective behavioral support strategies versus relying on a single "expert" such as a consultant or the special educator, b) create a mechanism to efficiently disseminate information across larger school buildings, c) increase the likelihood that effective practices will be sustained over time, and d) ensure the school system reflects the local school/community context. In addition, the district should also commit resources, such as behavioral expertise, professional development, and on-going technical assistance to assist schools in sustaining effective practices.

### **Responses to Violation of Expectations**

While the focus of school discipline should be on building appropriate behavior, some students with and without disabilities will continue to violate school expectations. In designing discipline policies to address severe problem behavior that violates school expectations, schools are strongly encouraged to a) implement best practices with respect to behavior management, b)

increase the range of disciplinary consequences available for use with students; and c) create alternative settings where students who cannot be maintained in their regular school or classroom environment can continue to receive appropriate education.

The major premises of the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders' position on school discipline are: the limited use of removal or exclusion of children and youth from learning environments; no long-term cessation of educational services; and limited use of punitive or aversive consequences. Schools need to create alternative settings where students can maintain appropriate education when removal from the typical setting is necessary. We acknowledge the need in crisis situations to remove students in order to ensure a safe learning environment, and the need to enact consequences for major school rule violations. However, removal should not become routine nor be viewed as an intervention; rather, it should be viewed only as a short-term response for safety purposes.

Likewise, the use of aversive consequences should be used only when other positive approaches have been unsuccessful, and should never be used in isolation. Districts should develop a unified discipline code that indicates the behavioral infractions that will result in an administrative action. The resulting administrative action should be selected from a continuum of responses to chronic or extreme patterns of problem behavior, and should be based on individual student need.

The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders further recommends the use of Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and individualized behavioral plans that describe positive behavioral supports, based on FBA data, for students without disabilities as a way to develop more efficient and effective plans that may result in the prevention of special education referrals. Functional Behavioral Assessment is a problem solving process that helps educators

develop plans to prevent inappropriate behaviors, and teach and reinforce appropriate alternative behaviors. Even when faced with extreme problem behavior, the emphasis should be on building pro-social alternative behaviors, and designing plans for ensuring those behaviors are maintained over time.

Due to past overuse of ineffective disciplinary practices with children and youth, especially in- and out-of-school suspension, CCBD believes that all students (whether or not they have disabilities) who display problem behavior should continue to receive a free and appropriate public education. In addition, schools should rely on evidence-based assessment, prevention, and management practices, such as FBAs and positive behavioral support plans for all students who need them. Further, we encourage schools to adopt these approaches as part of a unified discipline system for all students, thus eliminating the need for special procedures for students with disabilities. These procedures, when applied comprehensively and consistently, are more likely than other approaches to lead to positive changes in student behavior.

### **Conclusion**

The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders offers this position paper to assist districts in creating safe learning environments that promote the education of all students, including those with disabilities. The intent is also to ensure that schools create systems of behavioral support that maximize the likelihood that children and youth with chronic behavior problems including students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders and other disabilities will be successful. We recommended that school districts create unified discipline policies that clearly articulate behavioral expectations, adopt research-based strategies to teach and reinforce behavior that reflects those expectations, and build infra-structure to establish and maintain behavioral expertise across all educators within each school building.

## **Recommendations**

1. All schools should create unified systems of discipline which provide procedural protections for all students, and which employ research-based practices to change inappropriate behavior.
2. All schools should provide all students with positive behavioral supports which include:
  - a. A clear statement of purpose that focuses on both academic and social outcomes for all students and includes the faculty, staff, and parent's role.
  - b. Clearly defined expected behaviors
  - c. Procedures for teaching expected behavior.
  - e. Procedures for encouraging expected behavior.
  - f. Procedures for discouraging problem behavior, which involve a continuum of options not limited to punishment or exclusion.
3. All schools should implement a wide array of disciplinary consequences for all students which are matched to the severity of the problematic behavior. Exclusion, if used, should only be used for very brief periods during which more effective management plans are designed to support appropriate behavior in the general school environment.
4. All schools should develop and implement behavior intervention plans for all students who have chronic problematic behavior whether or not they are eligible for special education services.
5. All schools should minimize the use of exclusionary consequences in their disciplinary policies for all students, and where exclusion from a particular setting is used, should include procedures for appropriate continuing education in another setting for all students.

Paper approved by the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders Executive Committee,

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### **Note**

This manuscript was prepared on behalf of the CCBD Executive Committee by Tim Lewis, University of Missouri-Columbia, Reece Peterson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Brenda Scheuermann, Southwest Texas State University.

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