



Executive Summary

Evaluation Report for the
Study of Alternatives to Suspension

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by

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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).

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Introduction

Across the nation school systems 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.

Through Title IV funds the Florida Department of Education has contracted with Evaluation Systems Design, Inc. (ESDI) of Tallahassee, Florida, to conduct a **Study of Alternatives to Suspension**. The study will extend over two years through three phases, culminating in a final report that presents a recommended continuum of outcome-based best practices for alternative suspension services and include information on the use of service learning in these alternative programs. This report is submitted by ESDI as the first in a series documenting the activities and outcomes of the two-year study and encompasses activities conducted from January to July, 2004.

The purpose of the **Study of Alternatives to Suspension** is to work collaboratively with the Florida Department of Education to document best practices in Florida and across the nation in providing alternatives to suspension, document current practices in Florida, and create a continuum of outcome-based best practices that can be used by school districts in Florida in implementing appropriate and effective alternatives to suspension. Defined purposes of the study are:

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

The results of the study will be a comprehensive listing and description of outcome-based best practices that Florida school districts can use to improve and enhance their suspension alternatives.

Methodology

The four major research methods for Phase I were:

- 1. Telephone Interviews with Program Directors in Local School Districts**
- 2. Site Visits to Six Selected Projects**
- 3. Literature Review of National Research on Alternatives to Out-Of-School Suspension Programs**
- 4. Analysis of MIS Database Elements**

ESDI consultants worked collaboratively with the project managers for the study and the Title IV Statewide Coordinating Council to generate a set of structured-response data collection instruments for the interviews. ESDI staff contacted district staff in all 67 school districts to arrange a telephone interview or multiple interviews as needed. Overall, a total of 50 districts responded to these efforts for a response rate of 75%. Individual profiles of these 50 districts are included in a separate Appendix to the report.

To increase the knowledge and understanding of the details of the programs districts offer as alternatives to suspension, ESDI conducted site visits to six local school districts. The six districts were selected using a purposeful selection design sampling by district size and geographic region that ensured representation of large, medium, and small districts in the north, central, and south regions of the state. Four of the six selected districts also had been funded through Title IV for service learning projects.

ESDI conducted a comprehensive review of the state and national literature related to programs providing alternatives to suspension and expulsion. The result was an annotated bibliography of relevant references published within the last ten years that is included in the Appendix of this report. Finally, ESDI consultants worked with the Department to identify existing data elements already collected from districts through the annual DOE MIS data collection that could be used to track program components and/or outcomes for alternatives to suspension.

The data contained in the report represents preliminary results of an exploratory research effort. Telephone interview results from 50 of the 67 Florida public school districts represents 75% of the districts serving students in Florida. Most of the non-responding districts were small districts serving fewer than 15,000 students and tend to offer fewer services to students as alternatives to out-of-school suspension. Findings were supplemented and expanded through site visits to selected districts that allowed more time to explore the multiple factors impacting on decisions and services for students in danger of being suspended from schools. These results will be refined and updated in the research effort conducted in 2004-05.

Brief Summary of Initial Study Findings

Major program models examined included:

- ◆ **Prevention Programs.** Students who are disruptive or for some other negative reason come to the attention of teachers or administrators may be referred to school-based intervention teams, social skills, conflict mediation or character education classes, time out in another teacher's class or in the principal's office, or a behavioral specialist may be hired or contracted to work with individual students or with teachers in creating behavior management strategies. These strategies are designed to redirect the student's behavior and avoid suspension. These techniques may often be employed with ESE students and are designed to occur within the regular school day.
- ◆ **In school.** Students attend school within structured programs such as an alternative classroom often with academic instruction; students are assigned to work detail under the supervision of an adult; or students are assigned to a special class designed for suspended students
- ◆ **Before/After School.** Students can make up academic work under supervision at the school site before and/or after regular school hours.
- ◆ **Saturday School.** Students make up academic work in classes or participate in work details on the school campus with adult supervision on Saturdays.
- ◆ **Community-Based.** Students attend a program operated by a community-based agency such as YMCA through a district wide or individual school contract with the agency.
- ◆ **Special Program/Setting.** Students are re-assigned to alternative school placements within the district.

A brief summary of major findings included:

- ◆ Principals are the primary decision-makers for determining what delivery models are used for alternative programs to out-of-school suspension and the ways in which they operate (87% and 75%, respectively)
- ◆ The two most prevalent factors considered in selecting delivery models are available funds and staffing resources (75% and 69% of districts, respectively)
- ◆ The most prevalent delivery models are in-school programs (96%), special programs (68%), prevention programs (65%), and before/after school programs (63%).
- ◆ The most frequently used components within programs are parent involvement (66%), Character Education classes (64%), and individualized or group counseling (62%).
- ◆ The least frequently used program components were Restorative Justice Model, Service Learning, job shadowing or internships, and volunteering.
- ◆ A specific academic curriculum was reported as used in 32% of the alternative schools or off-site locations, but less than 10% of the Saturday school, before/after school, or community-based programs.
- ◆ Parent involvement was reported as employed in over one-third of the prevention programs and alternative schools or off-site locations, but in less than 15% of the Saturday school and before/after school programs.
- ◆ Staffing for all programs examined varied widely, with little consistency noted for any of the program models. Staffing for any of the models may be provided by classroom teachers, teachers with special supplements, administrators with or without supplements, paraprofessionals, guidance counselors, volunteers, school resource officers, contracted staff, or any combinations of these and other staff.
- ◆ Very few districts conduct formal or informal evaluations of the effectiveness of the various alternative programs to out-of-school suspension.
- ◆ Funding for these various program models to serve students in lieu of out-of-school suspension is obtained from many different sources. The most common funding mechanism is through the school's budget.

Issues

During the course of the initial phase of this extended research effort, several issues were identified that need continued exploration.

- ◆ Some districts continue to use corporal punishment as an alternative to out-of-school suspension.
- ◆ Some severe offenses (e.g. fighting) result in automatic out-of-school suspension, even in schools that have in-school suspension programs.
- ◆ Very few instances were noted of counseling or behavioral interventions included as a component in any of the alternative programs.
- ◆ Most districts rely on the Code of Student Conduct to define the policies and procedures for programs serving as alternatives to out-of-school suspension. Few examples were noted in which the districts defined the components of and procedures for these programs for standard implementation in schools or other sites.
- ◆ Principals and school staff determine what components/features to implement for most programs.
- ◆ The models being used are reflective of the staffing and resources available in the schools.
- ◆ Using the term “prevention” resulted in confusion with the myriad of academic programs targeted.
- ◆ Virtually no programs were noted in Florida or in the national literature that had outcomes-based evaluations.
- ◆ Schools collect and maintain data on attendance, but little or no follow-up or tracking is conducted to see what happens with the students after participation.
- ◆ Schools and districts seldom analyze the data that they have collected to determine the effectiveness of program alternatives or any other purpose.
- ◆ ESE students are included in some programs, excluded from others, and some programs intentionally do not collect data on which students may be ESE to avoid liability.

Recommendations for Continuation Activities

Based on the results from Phase I of the *Study of Alternatives to Suspension*, the following recommendations are made for continuing the research through the 2004-05 school year through these activities:

- 1. Conduct Site Visits to Ten Additional Districts.**
- 2. Conduct Pin-Point Research on Selected Promising Practices.**
- 3. Generate Evaluation Template for Program/District/State Use.**
- 4. Generate Final Report for Phase II.**

1. Conduct Site Visits to Ten Additional Districts.

During Phase I, site visits to six school districts were conducted to gain more indepth knowledge about the programs serving as alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and interview in person the people most directly involved with these programs. For Phase II, an additional ten school districts should be visited that will bring the total visited to 16 out of 67 (24%). Districts should be selected to represent promising practices that have proven success records; seek to include large, medium-sized, and small districts; and represent the geographical diversity of the state. Further examination should also be conducted of districts that have been funded for Title IV local programs to capture those programs that appear to be having the greatest impacts.

2. Conduct Pin-Point Research on Selected Promising Practices.

Phase I of the *Study of Alternatives to Suspension* demonstrated that virtually none of the alternative programs have evaluation components that track the success of students after leaving the program or demonstrate successful program outcomes. Most relevant outcomes for these programs are reduced recidivism, increased school attendance, increased earned credits, and remaining in school longer. Site visits revealed that some of these data may be available in districts through district or state databases, but districts and programs have little or no incentive or resources to compile and use these data.

Up to ten promising programs should be identified for which data are currently available and pin-point research conducted on the outcomes of the programs. Examples are programs in which attendance for the last two years has been maintained that includes a student ID number that can be linked to the state database, programs that have conducted follow-up surveys of students to determine their subsequent status, and programs for which formal evaluations are in progress or contain useful outcome measures. Key to this aspect of the study will be the cooperation of the school district and access to the district's database to track individual student academic success over time. The result of this activity will be outcome evaluations for up to ten programs. Evaluation designs should be created for each selected program, and plans made to collect and analyze the data and generate a written report that will be in a format that will be publishable.

3. Generate Evaluation Template for Program/District/State Use.

Although Phase I of the *Study of Alternatives to Suspension* demonstrated that virtually none of the alternative programs conduct outcome evaluations that track students exiting the program or compare results with students not participating in the program, local program managers expressed considerable interest in being able to document the successes of their programs. An evaluation template should be generated that will be usable by local program managers in organizing and conducting outcomes-based program evaluations. This template should be in a format that districts can use for multiple programs or that the state can use to conduct statewide outcome evaluations. Included in the template should be the following components:

- ◆ rationale, logic, and design of outcomes-based evaluations,
- ◆ specific data collection processes for the major types of programs,
- ◆ uses of comparison groups or longitudinal data to isolate the impact of the program efforts,
- ◆ appropriate data summarization and analysis techniques and methods,
- ◆ methods and templates for reporting results and recommendations on timing and sequencing of reports, and
- ◆ uses of results for improving programs and dissemination to key stakeholders and decision-makers.

The result of this component will be a template or set of templates with explanatory materials for use at the program, district, or state levels to plan, conduct, and use outcomes-based evaluations.

4. Generate Final Report for Phase II.

A final report should be generated that cumulates results from Phases I and II of the study. Included should be updated descriptions of district programs, specific details on at least ten promising programs that can be used by districts to set up and replicate these programs, results from the pin-point outcomes-based research on ten programs, and the templates for outcomes-based evaluation. The report should summarize the findings of all of the study activities to date. The final report of the *Study of Alternatives to Suspension* should include an executive summary, methods, findings, interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations for ongoing improvements in Florida's alternatives to out-of-school suspension programs and further outcomes-based evaluations of their efforts.

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