

EVIDENCE-BASED ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION

Summary: We need more solutions to help students struggling with behavior in California, not suspensions. Two decades of research show that out-of-school suspension is an educationally unsound solution. Students who are suspended are far more likely to drop out and get involved with the juvenile justice system. Sadly, in California, we rely heavily on punitive and harsh discipline that doesn't work and are issuing more suspensions than diplomas each year.

We can fix school discipline in California right now! This brief describes several research-based alternatives to suspensions and expulsions and policy changes that could be implemented by school districts and schools as specific actions in the Local Control Accountability Plan required under the new Local Control Funding Formula to reduce suspensions and expulsions.

For each strategy, there is a **description** of the strategy, **proof it works**, **references for where to go for more information, help and training**, and a description of its **cost**. The following strategies are included:

- Restorative Justice or Restorative Practices
- School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports
- Social Emotional Learning
- Trauma Sensitive Schools
- Training and Methods to Address Implicit Bias

The first 4 alternatives NOT ONLY lower suspension and expulsion rates, but they generally help schools in other important ways. Research shows:

1. They bring in more school funding by increasing attendance.
2. They result in higher academic achievement for all students—not just those struggling with behavior.
3. They improve school climate overall.
4. They generally result in greater teacher stability—teachers like coming to school when they know there is a plan to help students succeed and they have real support to address students struggling with trauma and other issues that cause them to act out.

Background on Local Control Funding Formula: To start, for the School Climate local priority area, the Local Control Funding Formula and the Local Control Accountability Plan require that the school district:

1. **Identify the Need and Metrics Used during the Required Needs Assessment¹:** identify the needs that were identified and metrics being used to measure progress; this means that the district should review its existing data on suspension and expulsion rates, broken down by all

¹ EC 52060(c)(1).

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student groups, including English learner (EL) and foster youth, and by school and using survey data on school climate, to set a baseline for the goals that are included in the LCAP.

2. **Set Yearly Goals for Reducing Suspensions and Expulsion Rates and Improving School Climate**² for each school and subgroup.
3. **Include Specific Actions**³ the district will take to reach the goals.
4. **Funding Expenditures**⁴: include the amount of funding that will be spent to reach the goals and ensure that the extra funding that is coming to the district for low-income, foster youth, and EL students improves services for them!

More information on the Local Control Funding Formula can be found at: <http://lcff.childrennow.org/>. Handouts summarizing how the law changes school funding and the process for developing the LCAP are available at: <http://www.aclusocal.org/issues/education/local-control-funding-formula/>.

The following pages describe **several recommended evidence-based alternatives** that the District can adopt as specific actions that have been shown to improve school climate and safety and reduce suspensions and expulsions.

² EC 52060(c)(1).

³ EC 52060(c)(2).

⁴ EC 52064(b)(1).

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Restorative Justice or Restorative Practices

Restorative Justice is an approach, originally used in the justice system that emphasizes:

- (1) repairing harm;
- (2) bringing together all affected to collaboratively figure out how to do so; and
- (3) giving equal attention to community safety, victims' needs, and offender accountability and growth.⁵

Traditional Approach	Restorative Approach
School rules are broken.	People and relationships are harmed.
Justice focuses on establishing guilt.	Justice identifies needs and responsibility.
Accountability = punishment	Accountability = understanding impact and repairing harm
Justice directed at the offender; the victim is ignored.	Offender, victim, and school all have direct roles in the justice process.
Rules and intent outweigh whether outcome is positive or negative.	Offender is responsible for harmful behavior, repairing harm and working towards positive outcomes.
Limited opportunity for expressing remorse or making amends.	Opportunity given to make amends and express remorse.

Restorative Practices, which builds upon Restorative Justice and applies in the school context, is used to build a sense of school community and resolve conflict by repairing harm and restoring positive relationships through the use of regular “restorative circles” where students and educators work together to set academic goals, develop core values for the classroom community and resolve conflicts.

Proof it works:

At Richmond High School in West Contra Costa Unified School District, a 2011 Restorative School Discipline Program cut the school’s nearly 500 suspensions by January 2011 in half by January 2012.⁶

West Philadelphia High School was on the state’s “Persistently Dangerous Schools” list for six years. After one year of implementing Restorative Justice, the climate improved dramatically: suspensions dropped 50%⁷ and violent acts and serious incidents declined 52% in 2007–2008, and another 40% by the end of the first semester in 2008.⁸ Go to FixSchoolDiscipline.org/toolkit/educators/restorative/ to find out more about Restorative Practices, including to obtain free and low cost resources for implementation.

⁵ Information in this section adapted from Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, “Restorative Practices are Evidence Based,” <http://www.rjoyoakland.org>; Dignity in Schools, <http://www.dignityinschools.org/>; San Francisco Unified Restorative Practices training manual.

⁶ Lumpkins, D. & Marshall, M. (02/28/2012), *Suspensions at Richmond High Plummet*, New America Media available at <http://newamericamedia.org/2012/02/suspensions-at-richmond-high-plummet.php>.

⁷ Adams, C. (2008), *The Talk It Out Solution: How can you promote safety? Try getting rid of the metal detectors*, Scholastic Administrator; see video: “The Transformation of West Philadelphia High School: A Story of Hope” <http://www.iirp.org/westphilahigh/>

⁸ Lewis, S., Ed. (2009), *Improving School Climate: Findings from Schools Implementing Restorative Practices*, International Institute for Restorative Practices, available at <http://www.iirp.org/pdf/IIRP-Improving-School-Climate.pdf>.

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Where can I go for additional information, resources and research?

Dignity in Schools, an organization committed to advocating for school discipline policy and adoption of alternatives to zero-tolerance discipline - <http://www.dignityinschools.org/>

Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing Restorative Practices into Oakland schools - <http://www.rjoyoakland.org/>

International Institute for Restorative Practices, a graduate school devoted entirely to the teaching, research and dissemination of Restorative Practices - <http://www.iirp.edu>

Safer Saner Schools, a project of IIRP, focused on achieving whole-school change through Restorative Practices - <http://www.safersanerschools.org>.

Restorative Visions School Project, a Human Rights organization dedicated to fulfillment of the Constitutional promise of Education Equality - <http://www.restorativeschoolsproject.org/>

Restorative Justice Online, a service of the Prison Fellowship International Centre for Justice and Reconciliation which provides intensive information about Restorative Justice
<http://www.restorativejustice.org/>

How much does it cost?

We recommend that you contact some of the Restorative Practices (RP) specialists above because the costs will differ depending on the size of your District and the needs analysis. In general, the RP folks we interviewed recommended hiring one or more RP District Coordinators and an RP coach for every two schools for the first few years of implementation. Others discussed providing train the trainer workshops for school-site teams but also ensuring there is an available expert RP coach who can assist and ensure fidelity of implementation in the first few years. Once staff are fully trained, the coaches will only be needed for more intensive interventions.

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School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS)

SWPBIS is a comprehensive, school-wide research-based system⁹ that is “based on the assumption that actively teaching and acknowledging expected behavior can change the extent to which students expect appropriate behavior from themselves and each other.”¹⁰ Under SWPBIS, serious behavior problems and overall school climate improve because faculty and staff actively teach positive behavior, through modeling expected behavior and rewarding positive behaviors, such as academic achievement, following adult requests, and engaging in safe behavior.¹¹ SWPBIS focuses on data-based analysis and decisionmaking and also includes a tiered intervention approach, that focuses on primary or universal positive behavior instruction and support for all students and increasing levels of interventions and supports for students with higher level behavior, emotional, and mental health needs.

Proof it works:

As of 2010, over 13,300 schools across the country were implementing SWPBIS. Studies have shown reductions in office discipline referrals of up to 50% per year.¹² Schools implementing SWPBIS report reductions in problem behavior, a more positive school climate, greater safety, and improvements in academic achievement and attendance.¹³ Go to FixSchoolDiscipline.org/toolkit/educators/swpbis/ to find out more about SWPBIS, including to obtain free and low cost resources for implementation.

Where can I go for additional information, resources and research?

California Services for Technical Assistance and Training– www.CalSTAT.org

Office of Special Education Programs Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports – www.PBIS.org

California Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports – www.pbiscaltac.org

Dr. Jeff Sprague, University of Oregon - <http://pages.uoregon.edu/ivdb/bios/sprague.html>

Safe and Civil Schools - <http://www.safeandcivilschools.com/>

⁹Simonsen, B., Sugai, G., & Negrón, M. (2008). *School-wide positive behavior supports: Primary systems and practices*, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 40(6). 32-40..

¹⁰Sprague, J., & Horner, R. (2007), *School Wide Positive Behavioral Support* in S. R. Jimerson & M. J. Furlong (Eds.), *Handbook of school violence and school safety: From research to practice*.

¹¹Adapted from Osher, D., Bear, G.G., Sprague, J.R., Doyle, W. (2010), *How can we improve School Discipline*; Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2012), *What is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*, www.PBIS.org.

¹²*Id.*

¹³*Id.*

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What does it cost?

We recommend you contact the specialists listed above who can give your District an estimate of costs based on the needs identified and the size of the District. They can also identify potential funding sources with your District and think through the best plan for implementation. The schools that we spoke with noted costs related primarily to training and technical assistance for the first few years which declined to zero once full implementation had been reached. They also noted ongoing cost savings due to increased ADA revenue due to improved attendance rates and lower suspension rates.

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Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is the process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions; developing caring and concern for others; making responsible decisions; establishing positive relationships; and handling challenging situations capably.

Five key competencies are taught, practiced, and reinforced through SEL in class and school instruction and programs:

- Self-awareness—Identification and recognition of one’s own emotions;
- Social awareness—Empathy, respect for others, and perspective taking;
- Responsible decision-making—Evaluation and reflection;
- Self-management—Impulse control, stress management, and persistence; and
- Relationship skills—Cooperation, help seeking, and communication.

Proof it works:

In Los Angeles USD, in 2007-2008, 58% of the model SEL schools showed 43% fewer discipline referrals, a 45% reduction in physically aggressive behavior, a 64% reduction in disruptive behavior, and at least 30 points of growth in academic performance.¹⁴ Secondary benefits of SEL include improved graduation rates and reduced violence.¹⁵

Since implementing SEL, a school in Chicago has seen great improvement in student achievement. Before SEL programming, during the 2004-2005 school year, 38% of the students met or exceeded state standards. By 2007-2008, 75% of the students met or exceeded state standards. Go to FixSchoolDiscipline.org/toolkit/educators/sel to find out more about SEL, including to obtain free and low cost resources for implementation.

Where can I go for additional information, resources and research?

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)—an organization providing funding, information, training and research around Social and Emotional Learning—www.casel.org

What does it cost?

One SEL approach, Positive Action, costs about \$7,000 for materials for a 500-student elementary school in the first year and about \$1,700 for updated materials for the school in subsequent years, while the initial training costs \$1,000 to \$3,000 plus travel expenses for the trainer. One rigorous study

¹⁴ Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, *Program Implementation: A Key to Success*, available at <http://casel.org/research/publications/?t=case-studies>.

¹⁵ Zins, J.E. & Elias, M. (2008), *Social Emotional Learning*, Children’s Needs III.

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found it reduced disruptive behaviors by 72% and suspensions by 24%. Another rigorous study found it reduced suspensions by 73% and grade retention also by 73%.¹⁶

¹⁶ Personal communications with Carolyn Pirtle, Consultant and Member of Implementation Design Team, Positive Action, Inc. April 26 and March 2, 2013.

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Trauma Sensitive Schools

Exposure to trauma has been shown to hurt a child’s ability to self-regulate their emotions¹⁷ and on executive functioning.¹⁸ The traditional response to these behaviors is punishment, including removal from class and school, which only reinforces the trauma and results in loss of instructional time, adding to the stress from trauma and contributing to student disengagement from school.

The goal of creating a “trauma sensitive school” is to reduce problem behaviors and emotional difficulties, as well as optimize positive and productive functioning for all children and youth. When schools are able to address the behavioral health needs of students in a proactive manner, rather than a reactive or ineffective one, they can increase the resources available to promote educational goals. School leaders in such Trauma Sensitive Schools recognize the importance of behavioral health and dedicate resources as part of an overall effort to reduce barriers to learning.

Proof it works:

In partnership with San Francisco USD, HEARTS mental health practitioners from UCSF have delivered more than 1,800 hours of training and consultation to 700 SFUSD staff and affiliates. In the target schools, HEARTS provides on-site psychotherapy and mental health consultation three days per week. In surveys, school staff in these schools report a 57% increase in their knowledge about trauma and its effects on children, and a 64% increase in their use of trauma-sensitive classroom school practices. At El Dorado Elementary School, where HEARTS has been in operation for 4 years, staff **reported a 32% decrease in such referrals and a 42% decrease in violent student incidents** after the first year of implementation.

Where can I go for additional information, resources and research?

The Behavioral Health and Public Schools Framework, Introduction to the Framework
<http://BPHS321.org>

HEARTS: <http://medschool2.ucsf.edu/spotlights/ucsf-hearts>

What does it cost?

The cost will depend on the intensity of the mental health services provided. HEARTS spent approximately \$400,000 for each of three implementation years, which funded services, training, and time at the three schools for 3 years, stipends for school staff to attend training after hours, and ongoing work with SFUSD on developing broader policies to support trauma-sensitive practices throughout the district.

¹⁷Kim, J., and Cicchetti, D. (2010). Longitudinal pathways linking child maltreatment, emotion regulation, peer relations, and psychopathology. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51(6): 707-716.

¹⁸DePrince, A., Weinzieri, K., & Combs, M. (2009). “Executive function performance and trauma exposure in a community sample of children.” *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22: 353-361.

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Implicit and Explicit Bias Training

The district could also focus on training on implicit and explicit racial bias to address disproportionate suspension rates and hone in on strategies, such as home visits or increasing parent-school staff connections and relationships, that have been shown to reduce disparities in the issuance of punitive discipline. Go to [FixSchoolDiscipline.org /toolkit/webinar-archive/](http://FixSchoolDiscipline.org/toolkit/webinar-archive/) and check out the free training by Tia Martinez from UCLA Civil Rights Project on this topic!

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Policy Changes

Your district can also make policy changes that will address school climate. Here are a few ideas that you could propose for policy changes:

1. Create a “discipline matrix” with the community to ensure that alternatives are used and documented prior to suspension;
2. Fully implement alternatives to suspension and expulsion in all schools;
3. Eliminate suspensions for willful defiance;
4. Require annual training for all staff on implicit bias and how to address it;
5. No new funding for school police;
6. Redirect or increase funding to school counselors and intervention workers;
7. Develop a policy or memorandum of understanding that will further define the role of police on campus and ensure that school discipline is addressed by school administrators and not law enforcement;
8. Eliminate citations and arrests for students in middle and elementary school and for low-level offenses; and
9. Commit to documenting and tracking alternatives to suspension.

Go to FixSchoolDiscipline.org to see an example of a Memorandum of Understanding developed by Pasadena Unified School District with support from the ACLU of Southern California that sets specific roles for police in schools.

TIP: Some policy changes cost very little or can save or bring in money (e.g., eliminating suspensions in a particular area means more ADA funding for the district)!

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