

Implementing NCLB Provisions in Arizona: An Evaluation of Fifteen Alternative-to-Suspension Programs

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Kris Bosworth, Ph.D.
Professor, Educational Leadership

Lysbeth L. Ford, MPH
Research Specialist

College of Education
The University of Arizona

Problem

Since disruptive behavior by a minority of students tends to interrupt the learning process for the majority of students, suspension and expulsion are widely used as a discipline strategy in schools across the nation. Yet, removing disruptive students from the educational process often lays the foundation for other more costly situations such as dropping-out and delinquency. Evidence of racial disparities in the practice, limited evidence of its effectiveness, and evidence tying suspension to negative educational outcomes have also led many to decry the use of suspension and expulsion.

Between 1974 and 1998 suspension rates nationally have nearly doubled. According to the 1998 Elementary and Secondary School Survey, the most recent one for which national projections are available, 3,185,721 students, or 6.93%, were suspended and 87,298 (0.19%) were expelled (Office for Civil Rights, 1998). Of these, 72% were males. Thirty years ago, in 1974, the overall suspension rate was 3.7% (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 2000; "What the Numbers Say," 2000). A number of researchers posit that zero-tolerance policies are partly responsible for the increase (see, e.g., Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 2000; Gordon, Della Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000).

Additionally, practitioners and researchers alike question how effective suspension is in deterring future misconduct. Costenbader and Markson (1998) asked students how much in-school or out-of-school suspension had helped them resolve the issue that had gotten them into trouble. On a four-point scale, 31% of in-school suspended, and 33% of out-of-school suspended students reported that suspension had helped them "not at all; I will probably be suspended again." Only 12% and 25%, respectively, agreed that "I will never be suspended again." Through a review of discipline records for students in grades K to 8, Atkins and colleagues (2002) found two distinct subsets of students: one whose behavior generally improved following a suspension in the fall quarter, and another whose misbehavior continued to escalate despite punishments. In Morgan-D'Atrio and colleagues' (1996) sample of high school students, 37% were suspended three or more times in the year. In one of the schools Skiba and Peterson (1997) reviewed, a particular student was suspended 22 times in a single academic year, and numerous other students experienced multiple suspensions that significantly reduced their school attendance. Clearly, then, there is a group of students who are regularly suspended and whose behavior does not change as a result of that experience. In fact, Costenbader and Markson (1998) theorized that suspension may help reinforce negative attitudes for a significant percentage of students who do not want to be in school or who are seeking a way to avoid difficult or unpleasant educational tasks. Atkins and colleagues (2002) reached a similar conclusion. In light of this, schools are increasingly looking to alternatives, including in-school suspension, off-campus programs, and alternative schools.

On a national level, the need for alternative discipline options has been identified. A section of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation provided states with funding

to offer community service as an alternative to suspension and expulsion (Nonregulatory Guidance, NCLB, 2002).

Approach

This paper describes a series of studies that were conducted by the University of Arizona through support from the Arizona Department of Education to identify model programs and best practices in alternatives to suspension programs and community service approaches to discipline. Initial research focused on a descriptive view of discipline approaches in Arizona. Results lead the Arizona Department of Education to issue a Request for Proposal that funded fifteen demonstration sites throughout the state. Each of the sites has been implementing a unique program that provides community service for suspended students. This paper presents the preliminary results of the process evaluation of the implementation of fifteen alternative to suspension programs in Arizona.

Background study

A stratified random sample telephone survey of district-level administrators, most often the Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent was conducted. The purpose was twofold. First, the goal was to understand how suspensions are being used and describe the context in which school discipline is being conducted with specific attention to alternatives to suspension approaches. Secondly, existing alternative to suspension model programs were sought.

Data were collected from a stratified (by enrollment) random sample of Arizona public school districts and charter schools telephoned during spring 2003. The survey instrument addressed six areas: (1) attitudes and philosophy about suspension and expulsion, (2) the process of suspension and expulsion, (3) parental involvement in the discipline process, (4) alternatives to suspension and expulsion, (5) attitudes about alternatives to suspension, and (6) the use of community service as an alternative to suspension. The overall response rate for public school districts was 80% ($n = 76$). The same methodology and survey were used in contacting 25 charter schools, to allow some comparison of their practices with those of public schools.

Results

According to the survey data, the majority of the districts used suspension and expulsion as the last resort (73.7%). One administrator reflected that with suspension or expulsion, “there is nothing that we hate more because in reality we are altering what (these students) lives will look like.” Most felt that alternative discipline options mitigated the negative effects of having the learning process disrupted for periods of time as in suspension by providing support, structure and an opportunity to learn from mistakes. District administrators reported an average of 2.3 alternative discipline options for students who commit infractions. These included in-school suspension, various types of detention, and student placement in an alternative school setting. Table 1 outlines the most frequent alternative discipline options as reported by district administrators:

Table 1: Most frequently reported discipline options¹, by district size

Discipline options	District: 0-499 n=13	District: 500–2,499 n= 23	District: 2,500–4,999 n= 13	District: 5,000–9,999 n= 12	District: 10,000 + n= 14	Weighted Average Percentage n=75
In-school suspension	53.8%	56.5%	76.9%	66.7%	71.4%	63.2%
Detention	46.2%	39.1%	46.2%	41.7%	71.4%	48.0%
Alternative school	7.7%	39.1%	61.5%	66.7%	71.4%	47.4%
In-home schooling	7.7%	17.4%	7.7%	0%	0%	7.9%
Charter school	0%	4.3%	23.1%	0%	7.1%	6.6%
Accelerated education	0%	8.7%	7.7%	0%	7.1%	5.3%

¹Districts reported more than one discipline option

When appropriate and available, administrators reported they were most likely to choose an alternative option to out-of-school suspension. Because alternative options for suspension can be costly to implement and smaller districts have fewer resources, the number of alternative options that the district offers is related to the size of the district. Alternative schools are also used as an alternative to long-term suspension, but rarely in smaller districts. At-home schooling was used more frequently in the smaller districts, and not reported in the larger two district size groups. This option seemed to be used where there was no other alternative school or charter school placement option. District administrators estimated that seventy-seven percent of students returned to the same school following long-term suspension. Those students who do not return to the same school are not tracked by districts so it is largely unknown whether they continue school elsewhere.

The majority of Arizona school districts (66%) reported using community service as a component of their discipline options. The most commonly described type of community service was custodial work or cleanup around the school grounds (50% of those who use community service in discipline). A large number of districts described the intent of such work as punitive: to make the student perform unpleasant work in sight of his or her peers. This was also described as a useful way to compensate for shortages in support staff due to budget cuts. A few schools described instances of using community service within a restorative justice paradigm (for example, having students who deface school property clean up graffiti on school grounds) or a learning paradigm (for example, assigning a student with poor reading ability to tutor younger students in reading) (less than 4%). Very few districts give students off-campus work assignments at specific agencies (12%), in part because of liability concerns and in part because of the absence of ongoing community collaborations to provide meaningful, well-supervised experiences.

Summary

Arizona school districts use a range of options for discipline that they consider alternatives to suspension. However, no model programs were identified through this survey.

Additional information was sought through a review of published studies and the World Wide Web to determine the efficacy of using community service as an alternative to suspension. While programs were identified across the nation, extensive searches failed to reveal evidence pertaining to the use or efficacy of mandatory community service as a disciplinary measure in the public or private school system. Failing direct evidence of efficacy, support for using community service as a component of suspension might come from the prevention literature in terms of studies showing either that community service is a deterrent to the types of behaviors that cause students to be suspended or that it is a feature of effective prevention programs for academic failure. More indirectly, criminal justice research documenting that sentencing juveniles to community service has a rehabilitative effect could also support the value of requiring troubled youth to perform community service. However, even such indirectly relevant research is sparse.

Community service as a suspension option

No Child Left Behind (P.L 107-110) includes a \$50 million allocation for programs requiring suspended or expelled students to perform community service. In proposing this amendment, Senator Byrd (D-WV) argued that community service would give youth “structure . . . promote a work ethic, and send the message that being suspended from school is not a vacation.” Moreover, it would “point troubled students toward true service to their communities, their country, and help them to become good, productive citizens” (*Congressional Record* S492, 15 May 2001). Using the NCLB guidance in conjunction with the background research on community service and discipline approaches, a Request For Proposals (RFP) was developed for the state of Arizona. In the RFP criteria, features that would most likely result in beneficial community service were carefully stipulated. These features were based on reports of effective community service practice based on formative evaluation and professional experience. A summary of this information is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of community service features

Topic	Source	Elaboration
Community service as a deterrent to delinquency	Hoffman and Xu (2002)	Community service has an attenuating effect on delinquency in schools where perceptions of school safety were low
Community service as prevention	Calabrese and Shumer (1986)	Temporary improvement in discipline referrals and alienation, but not attendance or GPA
	Allen et al (1990)	Prevention programs are more

		effective with community service component
Features of effective community service	Bazemore and Maloney (1994)	Service performed in a human context
	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Supervision from someone committed to service, for agency
	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Preparation, reflection, and evaluation
	Bazemore and Maloney (1994)	Clear beginning and end
	Bazemore and Maloney (1994)	Focus on quality and completion of work
Characteristics of effective community service	Bazemore and Maloney (1994)	Meaningful service that meets a clear need
	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Student participation in choosing a project

	Allen et al (1990)	For middle school, better outcomes if service promotes autonomy, sense of connection
	Bazemore and Maloney (1994)	Connection between service and infraction
	Allen et al (1990)	Quality is more important than quantity
Mechanisms for behavior change through community service	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Build relationships with positive role models
	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Give and receive acknowledgement / strengthen interaction skills
	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Prevent/break cycle of failure
	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Teach responsibility
	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Build competence
	Bosworth, Ford, and Anderson (2003)	Develop empathy

Demonstration projects

In December 2002, ADE funded fifteen programs statewide utilizing NCLB funds that (1) provide an alternative option to suspension and that (2) include a community service component. The demonstration projects exhibit a wide-range of characteristics. As can be seen in Table 3, these include differences in enrollment, charter status, area demographics and approach to community service. Six of the programs are located in communities classified as metropolitan, 7 in urbanized clusters, and 2 are located in rural areas. Seven programs are based out of charter schools. Three

programs serve elementary through high school students, 6 serve middle school through high school students, and 6 serve high school students alone. Additionally, two of the programs are located on the Navajo Indian reservation and one program borders Mexico.

Table 3: Demonstration project description

	Single school	District-wide	Alternative school	Charter school	Grades served	Urban/Rural/Urbanized cluster/Metro (U/R/UC/M)
AZ Charter Acad. Sup. Sch	Yes	No	No	Yes	4-12	UC
AMPHI – Digital Futures	No	Yes	Yes	No	9-12	M
Gila Bend Unified District	Yes	Yes	No	No	9-12	R
Greyhills Academy	Yes	No	No	No	9-12	UC
Kenilworth Transition Center	No	Yes	Yes	No	4-12	UC
Laveen Elem District	No	Yes	No	No	4-8	UC
Omega Academy	Yes	No	No	Yes	7-12	M
Parker USD	Yes	Yes	No	No	7-12	UC
Pima Partnership HS	Yes	No	No	Yes	9-12	M
Phx School of Acad Excellence	Yes	No	No	Yes	8-12	M
RCB HS	Yes	No	No	Yes	9-12	M
Shonto	Yes	No	No	Yes	9-12	R
Somerton	Yes	No	No	No	6-8	UC
Tucson Urban League	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	6-12	M
Winslow USD	No	Yes	No	No	7-12	UC

Each program has a unique approach to the mandated activities, as can be seen in Table 4. All but two programs have some sort of auxiliary component in addition to the community service. Examples include student service activities at various community nonprofit agencies and community restoration activities. Several programs also have additional components such as academic support and counseling services. Two programs consist only of community service activities. The most common (n=6) auxiliary component is a type of academic support. This consists of either tutoring or a computer-based curriculum for a program that runs all day long. The second most common (n=5) auxiliary component falls in the category of Life Skills and is most often a curriculum-based component that is taught to the students for part of the day. Four programs offer

mentoring as part of their program. This includes students mentoring students, adults mentoring students, and community elders mentoring students. Three programs offer a counseling component in either a group setting or one-on-one. One program includes a physical training component.

Approaches to the community service component vary widely among programs but tend to fall into one of three main types. In the first, students do a short day of community service of 4-8 hours once a week over a long period of time (n=3). The second approach is to do community service for a partial day and to do this for the duration of the suspension (2-9 days) (n=6). The third approach is for the students to do community service for the entire day (6-8 hours) for the total number of days in suspension (n=6). Table 4 outlines the program characteristics.

Table 4: Program characteristics

	# of students served	On-campus service	New program	Auxiliary components	Approach to community service
AZ Charter Acad. Sup. Sch	68	No	Yes	Yes	all day, 2-9 days
AMPHI – Digital Futures	13	No	Yes	Yes	4-8 hours/week over several weeks
Gila Bend Unified District	39	Yes	Yes	Yes	4-8 hours/week over several weeks
Greyhills Academy	13	Yes	No	Yes	all day, 2-9 days
Kenilworth Transition Center	282	No	No	Yes	~4 hours/day, 2-9 days
Laveen Elem District	42	No	Yes	No	~4 hours/day, 2-9 days
Omega Academy	18	No	Yes	Yes	all day, 2-9 days
Parker USD	19	No	Yes	Yes	~4 hours/day, 2-9 days
Pima Partnership HS	65	Yes	Yes	Yes	all day, 2-9 days
Phx School of Acad Excellence	5	No	Yes	No	all day, 2-9 days
RCB HS	27	No	Yes	Yes	all day, 2-9 days
Shonto	32	Yes	No	Yes	4-8 hours/week over several weeks
Somerton	56	Yes	No	Yes	~4 hours/day, 2-9 days
Tucson Urban League	49	No	No	Yes	~4 hours/day, 2-9 days
Winslow USD	211	No	Yes	Yes	~4 hours/day, 2-9 days

There is also variation in the types of community service locations and characteristics of the service. In total, the programs have used fifty-one service sites, or an average of 3.2 sites per program. Four programs use one service site, while three programs use six or more service sites. The most common type of service site is a community or neighborhood organization (32 service sites). This includes senior centers, donation and distribution centers, and eight food banks. The second most common site is a school-based service (n=10). This includes working in school cafeterias, landscaping or working in the administration. Lastly, nine sites include a variety of service types such as health care, animal care or teen court.

Methods

The cross-site evaluation consists of a process and an outcome evaluation. Each site is responsible for providing the University of Arizona with the required data through an online data collection system via a program website.

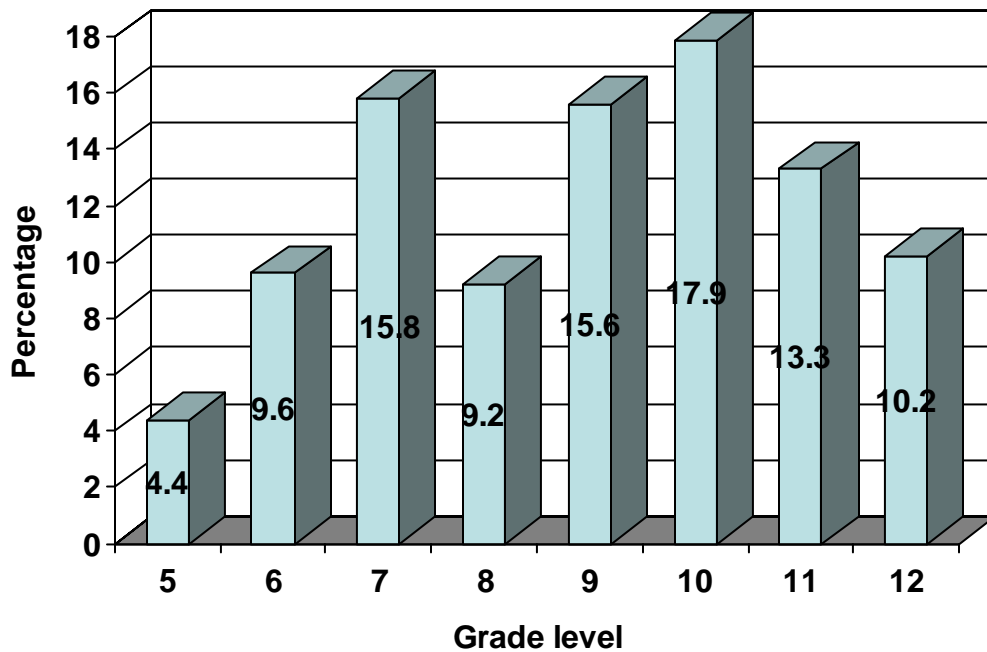
The first semester of program activity, Spring 2004, is used for the preliminary analysis of the projects. During this stage instruments were tested and the online system of data collection for appropriateness in the target groups, reliability and validity. The outcome evaluation focuses on the cohort of students who participate in the program during Fall 2004.

The data collection for both the process and outcome evaluation is ongoing via a program-specific website, phone interviews, in-person interviews, and site visits. Programs enter student outcome data and program process data monthly through the website. Phone interviews with the program coordinator of each project take place each semester. Site visits that included in-person interviews with project staff, the program coordinator, school administrators, and service site staff were held in Fall 2004. Follow-up site visits in Spring 2005 occurred for sites that were not fully operating in Fall 2004.

Population served

Preliminary analysis on the student data reveals that of the 519 students entered into the database that are being served by one of the fifteen programs, 65.9% are males and 69.0% have been held back at least one grade. Figure 1, below, shows the distribution of students by grade.

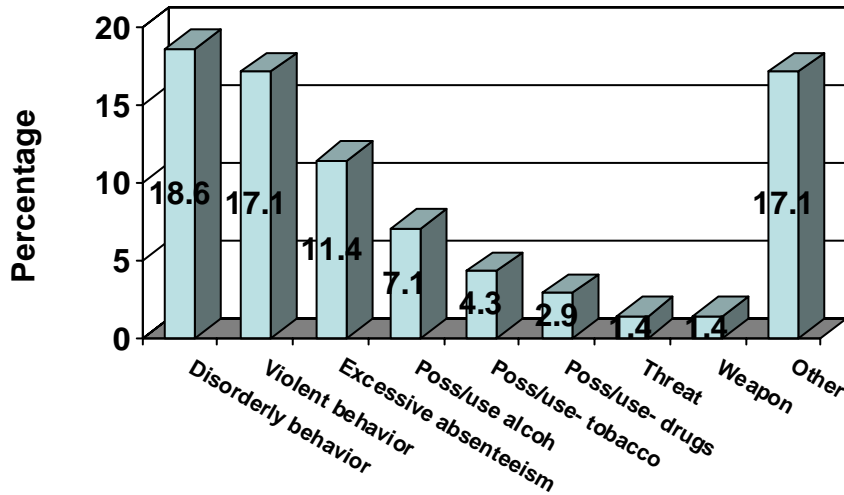
Figure 1: Student Participation by grade, by percentage



Grades seven, nine and ten represent the highest percentage of students. This is consistent with national suspension incidence patterns. The literature documents the highest suspension incidence in 7th and 8th grade, peaking in the 9th grade. However, it is important to note that the data in the table is not controlled for the number of total students in each grade who could potentially be served by the program. The data had a similar distribution, but with a smaller percentage of students in the 8th grade. It is unclear why the demonstration project data has a low percentage in 8th grade but it may reflect the grade composition of participating programs.

The types of suspendable infractions vary, as can be seen in Figure 2. The two most frequent suspendable infractions are disorderly and violent behavior. Of interest is the third most frequent type of infraction: excessive absenteeism. It is ironic, although not uncommon, to see students excluded from school for not attending school in the first place. The most severe types of infractions such as possession or use of drugs, making a threat, or possession of a weapon are the least frequent infraction for which these students enter the programs. This could be because these more serious infractions leave them ineligible for the program or that they are just not occurring at a high frequency. We are investigating these possible explanations. Further inquiry is needed to explain and describe the infractions that fall in to the “other” category.

Figure 2: Frequency of Suspendable Infractions



Preliminary process findings

Through the process evaluation, several themes relating to program success have emerged. First, finding and keeping qualified staffing is often problematic, especially in rural areas. Not having proper staff delayed the start dates of several programs (n=6). Conversely, a reported strength of nearly all successful programs was the presence of a dedicated and enthusiastic coordinator and staff. These people shared a commitment to program objectives and the concept of community service as part of a suspension program. They were critical to the success of the program. We also observed a direct relationship to the perceived commitment level of the coordinator and the ability to manage a steady program.

In a discussion with program staff on how to avoid staff turnover, it was agreed that motivating program staff was essential. More specifically, the ideas of how to motivate program staff fell into three categories.

- *Motivation through effective supervision.* Supervisors should be open-minded and positive. Supervisors should have a system for regularly checking in with the staff and getting feedback regarding the program or any other issues. As part of this, supervisors should recognize staff accomplishments.
- *Motivation through professional growth and development.* To keep program staff motivated, they should play a part in setting their own goals/expectations and have opportunities for professional development. Also, staff should be involved in the development of the program if possible, or the ongoing shaping of the program.
- *Beneficial characteristics of the program staff.* Have program staff that are flexible with changes and who “believe” in the program. It helps to have program staff with previous experience.

The second emergent theme was the impact of support by school and/or district administrators. During the initial phase of the program development, one third of the programs reported difficulties stemming from poor intra- and/or inter-school communication, insufficient support/buy-in from school administrators and partner schools, and few, if any, partnerships with service agencies in their local community. By the midpoint of funding, the majority of programs also reported broad support among community members, school administrators, teachers and the parents of participating students. The programs that reported having the most community support also reported participating in activities that made the community more aware of the program and its goals. In the case of a Native American community, there was community opposition at the onset of the program. Great efforts were made by the program coordinator to promote the program, including attending local tribal meetings to present on the discipline situation in their school and involving a range of community members in designing the program. This has resulted in an overwhelming amount of community support as demonstrated by the number of community partners who want to be involved in the program and tribal officials from outlying areas who also want to have their students participate in the program.

Lastly, programs that run smoothly are characterized by staff who are effective program managers. This was often demonstrated by the development of documents that support program processes. Most programs have drafted written policies and procedures to help guide program implementation (n=12), and established clear lines of communication between school administrators, program staff, and service site representatives (n=10). Often the procedures were included in a form letter or permission slip intended for the parents of the student participants.

Summary

It is important to also consider the program aspects that were expected to be barriers to program implementation but proved not to be. Rural areas have fewer options for outside agency-based community service locations. Additionally, any existing options may be located many miles from school campuses. However, creative community service options negate location as a barrier. For example, a program can have agencies bring service projects to the school campuses. In one case, program participants created gift baskets for an area hospital. Also, many programs have found options for service on campus that do not emphasize a punitive approach. This may include helping in the cafeteria or doing administrative work.

Through the Arizona Department of Education and the University of Arizona partnership, schools and service agencies have implemented creative alternatives to suspension. Because of the variety in the contexts and environments of these programs, the process evaluation is likely to lead to great insight on the application to such programs in different areas across the country. From interviews and anecdotal comments from program planners, service site personnel and from students, we anticipate that these demonstration sites will lead to positive changes in individual students and will yield models to be emulated at other sites. While we do not understand the full extent of successes, these demonstration programs will show how community service can be used with suspended students in a wide range of settings.

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