September 2014

BEST PRACTICES FOR IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION PROGRAMS

Since the late 1970s, in-school suspension programs (ISS) have been used by schools and districts as an alternative to out-of-school suspension. This document is intended to provide superintendents with information on how to most effectively utilize ISS as an alternative to school exclusion that focuses on continuing the curriculum and providing the opportunity to identify and eliminate the root cause of misbehavior. Many school districts are moving away from viewing and using ISS as a punitive and exclusionary tool, and towards seeing it as an opportunity to support students with varying social, emotional, and behavioral needs in a positive and proactive environment.

ISS Program Planning

A district should have a mission statement explaining the goals of the ISS program that is clearly understood by all school personnel as well students and parents. The ISS philosophy and goals should be developed and agreed to by the same individuals and groups involved in determining other school climate and student disciplinary policies and procedures. All school personnel should have an appreciation of how ISS works and what outcomes are expected. ISS should be a seamless component of a holistic, positive and preventative discipline system. For an ISS program to operate effectively there must be school-wide support for all components of the school discipline plan.

Successful in-school suspension programs require thoughtful planning in order to reconnect students to the school community, address underlying behavioral issues and avoid lost instructional time. An effective ISS program can allow schools to maintain safety and order in the school building and intervene to address behavioral issues without excluding students from school. Exclusion from the classroom should be considered thoughtfully in order to be productive and avoid further disconnecting students from the regular classroom. The first task for school superintendents in examining their ISS program operations is to determine the goals and desired outcomes for the program. Chief among these considerations is to determine whether ISS is an integral part of a school-wide system of positive behavior supports, and whether ISS can provide students with the support necessary for behavior modification to occur. If so, then the superintendent and leadership team should evaluate the structure of the ISS program.

At the most basic level, effective ISS programs have the following components:

- Adequate physical space
- Appropriately placed personnel who can provide students participating in ISS programs with a variety of cognitive and non-cognitive supports
- A consistent referral process
- A comprehensive evaluation process
- Communication with parents
- Data collection and analysis

Adequate Space

Administrators should work to hold ISS in a consistent and separate location that is conducive to learning and that allows students access to services and facilities. If space is unavailable in the school building the student attends, school administrators should exercise discretion to locate the pupil in a structured learning environment, even if this space is in another school building under the jurisdiction of the district. If located away from the student's regular school, transportation may

need to be provided. In order to ensure student safety and age-appropriate supports, students from elementary, middle and high school should not be in the same ISS room. Superintendents should limit the number of students in the room each day to a 15 student to one teacher ratio or less, allowing the staff to give students individual attention.

Continuing the Curriculum

A superintendent should designate an individual to act as the in-school suspension coordinator. ISS coordinators within schools are generally tasked with coordinating assignments and services for students in ISS with administrators, teachers and staff; maintaining communication with parents; managing referral paperwork; collecting data on the student's performance in ISS; and participating in the development of school-wide discipline policies. The ISS coordinator or ISS room supervisor is responsible for ensuring that teachers provide academic content and materials to ensure ISS students can complete their assignments and keep up with the their classmates. The coordinator should also collect completed assignments and ensure they are given to appropriate classroom teachers each day.

Students with disabilities must continue to receive the accommodations and supports they would have otherwise received if they had not been removed from the classroom.

Addressing Root Causes of Behavioral Issues

Each student in ISS should meet with a school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker or other qualified school mental health professional to explore the root causes of their misbehavior. ISS can be an opportunity to bring together students who may have been involved in a conflict to mediate the situation and resolve issues that precipitated the need for disciplinary intervention. If students have more significant mental or behavioral health needs, ISS can be a way to provide appropriate services. In addition to completing classroom assignments, students may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on a behavioral incident in writing.

Referral

Schools should have a system in place for identifying what infractions or misbehaviors qualify a student for ISS. Consistent guidelines for what offenses qualify for ISS and the length of time a student spends in ISS should be developed. ISS should not be a primary intervention for addressing student misbehavior and other less exclusionary measures should be attempted first. Districts should determine whether school administrators are the only school building personnel who can assign students to ISS or if teachers and other staff are able to make this referral. ISS assignment information should be detailed in the code of conduct.

When considering whether a student should be referred to ISS, administrators should determine:

- Is there another way misbehavior could be addressed that would not require lost class time?
- Is the child's presence in the regular classroom a risk to the safety of students or staff?
- What academic services would be needed to ensure the student does not fall behind in school work?
- What non-academic services would be needed to address any underlying mental health or behavioral health concerns?
- If the misbehavior involved conflict between the student and another member of the school community, how can that conflict be addressed while the student is in ISS?

- What is the student's behavioral history?
- Is there a plan for re-entering the classroom and avoiding future misbehavior?
- Does the student have an IEP or other special needs that will need to be addressed in an ISS placement?

If a referral is warranted, the following steps should take place. First, an explanation should be provided to the student and his or her parent/guardian about the reason for ISS referral, and the student and parent/guardian should have an opportunity to respond. Second, a plan should be provided to the student and parent/guardian that ensures the student will not fall behind in class and that underlying behavioral issues will be addressed.

ISS Evaluation

Accurate and comprehensive documentation of the student's referral and experience in ISS and after ISS is critical. A district should maintain a student file which includes an explanation of the student's referral to ISS, including the details of the incident, any other students who were involved and the referring staff member. School level data should be kept which show patterns of student referral from certain teachers, subjects or settings, evidence of student success upon returning to class and the frequency with which individual students are referred to ISS more than once.

Upon completion of ISS, the coordinator or school counselor should continue to track the student's progress and follow up with teachers. The ISS coordinator or a counselor should also meet with the student in the weeks after the ISS has concluded. Notes documenting the student's experience in ISS both from the student and coordinator perspective should be included in the evaluation. Using an ISS student rating sheet or rubric can be an objective way to collect information about student outcomes. If a teacher referred a student to ISS or was involved in the student's referral to ISS, notes on the student's progress in class after ISS should be included as well. In addition, the file should indicate the work that was completed by the student during ISS and evidence of the student's academic progress during ISS.

Family Engagement

Most effective discipline models call for family/parental involvement. Parents should always be notified as to discipline infractions and consequences students are receiving at school, as well as receiving positive news when students are meeting expectations and contributing positively to the school environment. In cases of ISS, parents/guardians should be informed of the ISS plan. Engaging parents also allows for a conversation that may reveal additional risk factors for the student or provide important context for the student's misbehavior. Administrators, staff, students and parents/guardians all have a role to play in building positive school cultures and fostering a climate of respect.

Resources

- The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System
- Cleveland Metropolitan School District's Innovative 'Planning Centers' Provide Alternative to Punitive In-School Suspensions