

A Student

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English Per. 5

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School Suspensions

In the fall of 2013, I was the recipient of a suspension at Helena High School. I drew on a vehicle in the school parking lot with washable paint. I caused no damage to the car, but I did cause distress to its owner. If the administrators truly believed I was a vandal or a bully, they did little to address or amend this behavior. I was informed that the standard for this misdeed is five days of out-of-school suspension; however I received three days of in-school-suspension. I admit this act deserved a fair punishment, but I do not agree that suspension was the appropriate response to what I had done. My cohorts and I felt that we learned virtually nothing from the discipline we received, and that some of us rather enjoyed the time out of school. This experience introduced me to the faults in our disciplinary system at Helena High and how little success school suspensions have for our students. "Nationwide, data from the federal Office of Civil Rights show that 3 million children in grades K-12 were suspended during the 2011-2012 school year." (Sandalow, Judith). This shows the excess of suspensions in our schools across the nation and how large the issue really is. School suspensions, while sometimes necessary, are a poor attempt at changing behavior and have detrimental effects on the quality of Helena High School and its students.

Major disadvantages of the use of school suspensions are that they take away from the academic success of students and bring down low academic students further. Christine Christle, C. Michael Nelson and Kristine Jolivet at the University of Kentucky found that “Students who are suspended tend to receive lower grades, are more likely to have learning or emotional disabilities, or to have academic skill deficits” (Christle, Christine; Nelson, C.; Jolivet, Kristine). Also, research shows that once a student receives a suspension, they are much more likely to receive another (Gee, Robyn). Giving students just one suspension has the potential to take them out of school over extended periods of time and even permanently (Gee, Robyn). According to Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University, “49% of students who entered high school with three suspensions on their record eventually dropped out of school” (Gee Robyn). Suspending students starts them on a path of failure and can lead to complete scholastic failure. In an interview with Cherche Prezeau, Vice Chair of the Helena School Board, she stated that the most important things to the school board are achievement rates and graduation rates (Prezeau, Cherche). The use of suspensions seems to counteract both of these goals. Vice Chair Prezeau strongly opposes the current excess of school suspensions at Helena High (Prezeau, Cherche). The superintendent of the Helena School District, Dr. Kent Kultgen, stated that many students who receive out-of-school suspension are most likely those who struggle academically (Dr. Kultgen, Kent). As a result of this, the students who receive out-of-school suspension may view the experience as a vacation and it could lower their education even further (Dr. Kultgen, Kent). School suspensions take away from the academic opportunities of students and decrease academic success.

Along with academics, suspensions can take away from the security of students. Many students who are given out-of-school suspension have poor living conditions and are forced to

stay at home, alone, in an unsafe environment during suspension (Graham, Edward). In an article from the National Education Association, Edward Graham stated that “out-of-school suspensions, more often than not, push these already at-risk students onto the same streets that played a role in their suspension. Students living in high-crime neighborhoods are twice as likely to be suspended from schools than those living in low crime neighborhoods” By using suspensions, schools are pushing low income individuals back on the streets that forced them to act out. The whole purpose of schooling is to provide children with a safe environment to educate and prepare them for life. Taking students away from their education and keeping them at home where it could prove to be dangerous seems counterintuitive.

Even more unsettling is that students in suspensions are receiving these suspensions for highly inadequate reason. Dr. Kultgen agreed with the statement that the only appropriate reasons for suspension in school is if the student makes it impossible for others to learn, or if the student poses a danger to another in the school (Dr. Kultgen, Kent). This should be the standard that administrators should follow when ruling school suspensions. This is not the case, however. The students at the University of Kentucky also found that “researchers have found that minor offenses, such as disobedience, disrespect, attendance problems, and classroom disruption commonly result in suspension” (Christle, Christine; Nelson, C.; Jolivette, Kristine). Giving suspension for such offenses seems to oppose the goals the administrators are trying to achieve and it in no way relates to the issue at hand. Judith Sandalow found that in D.C., “13 percent of students were suspended at least once during the 2011-2012 school year” and “the vast majority of these suspensions were for behaviors involving no drugs, no injuries, and no weapons.” Suspensions are given all around the country for inadequate reason; teachers need to suspend only when completely necessary and when it will help the individual student.

Suspensions are given for inadequate reason in many cases at Helena High. After questioning student 1, she revealed that she was given in-school-suspension for having too many tardies in a single class. When you consider the goal of any school is to provide education, this seems rather counterproductive. The reason for discipline for tardies is because the student is missing the material the teacher is presenting; punishing this act by refusing the attendance of the student is causing the same problem that you are trying to prevent. Student 2 at Helena High received a full week of in-school suspension for posting an inappropriate picture of a teacher on the internet. While this act does deserve a severe punishment, it in no way disrupts the education of students nor endangers anyone. Student 3 has been threatened with in-school suspension for too many unexcused absences. This poses the same question as the case with student 1: how are these disciplinary actions solving the problem? These are prime examples of how suspensions are being misused at Helena High. This hinders the learning of students when alternatives could be found to keep students in class. Instead of using suspensions a form of severe punishment for any misdeeds, they should only be used in specific, appropriate situations at Helena High.

Even if a suspension is given for an appropriate reason, in most cases, suspensions simply fail to halt the acts that are the subject of punishment. The students at the University of Kentucky found that suspension “is not effective in reducing the behavior problems it is intended to address” (Christle, Christine; Nelson, C.; Jolivet, Kristine). Why are we enforcing such discipline if it is not accomplishing the goal it sets out to? Neil Blomberg, from the Department of Education and Human Services at Villanova University, found that “Research does not strongly support the effectiveness of OSS (out-of-school suspension) in reducing and eliminating student misconduct” (Blomberg, Neil). Blomberg reports on a study by Costenbader and Markson in 1997. These researchers found that “of 252 students who had been suspended during

their school career, sixty nine percent of those surveyed felt that suspension was of little use, and 32% predicted that they would be suspended again. The survey also found that 55% of students suspended were angry at the person who had suspended them” (Blomberg, Neil). These statistics indicate that the use of suspension has little influence on students. Furthermore, the use of suspension makes many students return to school less focused, less engaged, and have more chance of causing class disruptions after a suspension (Sandalow, Judith). Blomberg states that students rarely learn from their punishments and students who are suspended rarely avoid further suspension (Blomberg, Neil). In my experience of in-school suspension at Helena High, there was no effort to teach how to correct my behavior. I was not counseled as to how to change my actions. In an article of the National Association of School Psychologists, George Bear states that authoritative educators should “view disciplinary encounters not merely as situations that may require punishment as a means of correction, but as opportunities to teach appropriate behavior and help develop self-discipline and prevent future behavior problems” (Bear, George). This is where many schools’ use of suspension lacks: instead of simply punishing students for misdeeds with suspension, schools should use it as a time to help the students correct their behavior and perhaps stop them from making the same choice again. The use of suspension in schools is ineffective in many cases and requires an alternative form of punishment.

The failure of suspensions in schools shows that alternative forms of punishment should be pursued in these circumstances. In the interview with Vice Chair Prezeau of the Helena School Board, she stated that schools should put more focus in halting misdeeds before they occur, rather than punishing afterward (Prezeau, Cherche). Judith Sandalow of the Huffington Post agrees with Vice Chair Prezeau, stating that “we need to focus on alternatives that empower teachers to figure out why a child misbehaves and equip him or her to do better in the future”

(Sandalow, Judith). Also, an article in the Institute for Advancing Unity states that “Meeting the developmental needs of youth may be a better alternative than exclusionary discipline practices that do not teach youth appropriate behavior and do not allow students to develop self-control” (“Rethinking School Discipline”). Schools should provide students with the environment and the teachers they require to avoid misbehavior. A strategy of creating a positive environment in schools to prevent negative behavior from occurring is often referred to as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports or PBIS (Gee, Robyn). PBIS is a program that schools could use to improve behavior of students and decrease the amount of needed discipline in general (Gee, Robyn). According to Dr. Rob Horner of the University of Oregon, PBIS is being used in over 8,000 schools in the nation and “has even caught traction with the White House” (Gee, Robyn). This technique could provide an overall positive atmosphere in schools and decrease discipline issues. Alternatives to suspensions can be to simply halt poor actions before they begin and provide a positive environment for students.

When punishments are completely necessary, there are other alternatives to teach the student through proper discipline. The Sunnyside Unified School District in Tucson, Arizona has one alternative to out-of-school suspension. The Sunnyside District has formed linkages with private educational agencies in the area that will accept suspended students for the entirety of their suspension (Storm, Alan). The district can send their students that require suspension to this facility where they can truly address what they have done wrong and amend the misdeed (Storm, Alan). Purely exiling students from school is ineffective in teaching the child what he or she has done wrong. “Students need opportunities to learn from their mistakes and develop skills to thwart further behavioral infractions” (“Rethinking School Discipline”). A policy to allow students to learn from their mistakes can prevent the need for future discipline. Solutions Not

Suspensions, The National Opportunity to Learn, and Opportunity Action performed a study on the use of suspensions and stated that “State policymakers should promote new alternatives to school discipline aligned with restorative justice practices and positive forms of school discipline” (“Stopping Out-of-School Suspensions”). Schools should have policies to give students positive discipline strategies to learn from their mistakes. Some changes in discipline to enforce this are an increase in community service, restorative justice programs and positive behavior incentives (“Stopping Out-of-School Suspensions”). These strategies to help students learn from their mistakes could prove to be much more effective than the use of school suspensions. There are many effective alternatives that schools could enforce in order to halt much of the use of school suspensions.

The use of alternative discipline instead of school suspensions could prove to have great benefits among the Helena School District. Vice Chair Prezeau stated that she could not think of any downfall to reducing the amount of current suspensions used by the Helena schools as long as students were getting properly disciplined (Prezeau, Cherche). These proper disciplines could be many different alternatives to school suspensions, as long as the students are learning from their mistakes and the punishment is helping them fix the issue. Without the use of unnecessary suspensions, we could create a higher quality environment at Helena High. Teachers would still have adequate, alternative discipline for students who misbehave, and students would not feel as though their punishment is useless. The need for discipline would diminish greatly and students would behave much better in classes if we had discipline that teaches students to right their wrongs. Another benefit would be the increase in academic success and the graduation rates (Gee, Robyn). Students who are not suspended won’t end up dropping out of school; those students who are not suspended will be in their classes learning the material their teachers are

providing. Graduation rates and academic success are two major aspects a school is judged by, and suspension reduction could prove to raise both of those numbers. Lastly, a major benefit of reducing school suspensions and enforcing discipline to teach students is that children learn lifelong self-discipline (Bear, George). “Research shows that self-discipline promotes positive relations with others and a positive school climate, fosters academic achievement, and promotes self-worth and emotional well-being” (Bear, George). The use of techniques such as restorative justice practices and community service can prove to teach students self-discipline that will help them through their whole lives (Bear, George). Students who can accomplish this self-discipline will be able to avoid future punishments and have a positive attitude toward schooling. There are many benefits that can come from the reduction of suspensions in schools; Helena High would gain a great amount through enforcing some of these alternative disciplinary strategies.

While school suspensions are almost always a poor way to enforce discipline, they are necessary in certain circumstances. Dr. Kultgen stated the only two appropriate uses of suspensions are if the student makes it impossible for others to learn, or if the student endangers another in the school (Dr. Kultgen, Kent). In these instances, it would be detrimental to keep these students at school; keeping these students off school property temporarily is a necessity in these situations. However, alternatives to this problem can still be met. Helena High might consider following the example of those in the Sunnyside Unified School District in Tucson (Storm, Alan). This strategy of an alternative facility to send suspended children where they receive disciplinary education could prove to handle those students who could not be trusted at school (Storm, Alan). However, this strategy brings up other conflicts, such as money to pay the facility and providing for the safety of the students in two separate locations. However, an alternate strategy similar to this method could prove to solve the problem of these necessary out-

of-school suspensions. Although the complete eradication of suspensions is impossible without risking the loss of education and the safety of others, school suspensions are truly detrimental to the environment of Helena High and a strategy needs to be met to reduce the amount of suspensions.

The use of school suspensions at Helena High School does little to alter behavior and brings down the quality of education and overall persona of the school. After my experience of in-school-suspension, the problem with the disciplinary policy at Helena High became evident. The whole purpose of education is to provide children with the opportunity to learn; the idea of school suspensions is in direct opposition to this purpose and should only be enforced when completely necessary. Altercations need to be made at Helena High to keep students in class and help them learn from their disciplinary experiences as much as possible. Discipline is never a positive experience for the one being punished or the one punishing, but it is essential that necessary discipline is handled with hard work and care to provide the best outcome for schools.

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