### a resource for teachers and school administrators



# SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

#### when citing this work please use

Hemphill S.A. & Hargreaves J. School suspensions - a resource for teachers and school administrators, Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, Melbourne 2010

#### for correspondence please contact

Associate Professor Sheryl Hemphill PhD phone: +61 3 9345 6953 email: sheryl.hemphill@mcri.edu.au



This booklet is made possible by the support of The RE Ross Trust and the Collier Charitable Fund







cover photograph by Cassie Diprose inside photography by John Hargreaves artwork and design by RaraAvis - http://raraavis.com.au



trade off.

environment in the school.

needs of the many.

## Managing student behaviour is often a

- Of primary concern is the maintenance of a safe and healthy teaching and learning
- This often results in the needs of individual students being sacrificed for the
- But recourse to school suspensions or other exclusionary policies is rarely effective and often counter productive.
- The negative impact of school suspensions is more far-reaching than may be anticipated, for both individual students and the entire school community.

Excluding students from school is a very common disciplinary practice.

In 2007, 12% of Year 10 students in Victorian secondary schools reported they had been suspended at least once within the last 12 months.

Among years 7 and 9 Victorian students, 11% of boys were suspended compared with 6% of girls.

Across Australia, years 6 and 8 students reported an average suspension rate of 5.9%.

The use of school suspensions fits within a zero tolerance framework. It seeks to reduce challenging behaviours primarily through deterrence, purporting to send a clear message to students that certain actions will not be tolerated and will incur serious consequences

But this get tough approach is likely to send mixed messages to both the individual and the school community.



School suspensions are not always reserved for the worst behaviours, but often used for non-violent or non-threatening conduct such as truancy, talking back to teachers, uniform violations or being late for school.

Factors unrelated to student behaviour can make the use of suspensions more likely

- teacher attitudes that students are not capable of handling problems
- a lack of fair, firm and consistent treatment of students across the campus
- a pre-existing high rate of administering suspensions in the school.

Students are more likely to be suspended if they are

- socially and economically disadvantaged
- in a cultural minority group
- male.

School suspensions reduce the chances of students completing their education.

School suspensions can also impair employment opportunities and negatively affect a student's future.

By excluding students from school, suspensions shift the problem from the school to the community. Unsupervised adolescents are free to engage in activities that can lead to

- property loss
- physical injury
- increased medical, police and juvenile justice costs.

A common misconception is that school suspensions benefit other students and staff.

However, research shows that in schools that make frequent use of suspensions, students and staff experience

- a lower sense of security
- a less positive school climate
- poorer academic results.



Suspensions give students who do not like going to school what they want - time off school.

Some students actively seek suspensions to participate in activities and events outside school, such as staying at home to play video games.

An individual may gain notoriety and the attention and admiration of peers by provoking a school suspension.

In these ways, the misbehaviour that gets a student into trouble is rewarded and is more likely to be repeated in the future.

Recent research in schools has uncovered some disturbing statistics about the impact of suspensions on students.

Within 12 months of being suspended from their schools, students are

- 50% more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour
- 70% more likely to engage in violent behaviour.

Six risk factors that tell us when a student is more likely to behave anti-socially.

School suspensions are the third biggest risk for anti-social behaviour and a factor that schools can most readily influence.

It might seem that school suspensions are not surprising when you consider all the other risk factors. But this diagram shows the contribution that each factor makes independent of the other factors. So reducing the frequency of school suspensions would reduce the risk of anti-social behaviour in students.



number of times student more likely to behave anti-socially 12 months later

thinks drugs are OK

thinks drugs

are easy to get

low school grades

suspended from school

	conflict at hom	ne l		Seven risk factors that tel likely to behave violently.		
	hangs out with violent peers		School suspensions are the violent behaviour and the o			
	accept drug us community no organised suspended from	community attitudes accept drug use community not organised suspended from school		can readily influence. Again, this diagram shows each factor makes indepen So reducing the frequency would reduce the risk of vistudents.		
	history of arre				-	
	0	1	2	3	4	

number of times student more likely to behave violently 12 months later

tell us when a student is more tly.

the third biggest risk for he only factor that schools

ows the contribution that pendent of the other factors. ncy of school suspensions of violent behaviour in



Adolescence is a very special time, but for many teenagers it can be an arduous journey.

Difficulty at school or in a student's wider life often underlies the misbehaviour that leads to a suspension.

It really helps if they can talk things out with a trusted friend, teacher or other significant adult.

School can be a safe dependable refuge in times of challenge, change and uncertainty.

connecting with school gives access to a support base, keeping going mentors, friends, at school learning and lots can help ensure of constructive positive activities health and wellbeing outcomes students who complete school improve employment opportunities and life choices, with short and long term benefits

link families with community agencies if there are problems at home

> promote reflective practice and generate a forum that encourages staff to regularly discuss issues and solutions

indicated provide access to relevant professional development for all staff

arrange assistance

for literacy,

numeracy

or other learning

difficulties if

Nothing is as effective as the personal touch.

Try to find out what underlies a student's challenging behaviour and provide constructive responses to address the issues.

Student management is most effective if applied when and where the trouble occurs.

School administrators can support their staff by nurturing classroom and playground management skills.

It is important to assess each case of student misbehaviour individually and tailor the response accordingly.

If there is no alternative, there are ways to offset some of the negative consequences of suspending students and ensure more positive outcomes.

But school suspensions should only be considered as a last resort for the most serious behavioural transgressions.

use internal suspensions, where students are supervised in separate areas such as another campus or near admin offices set personalised and purposeful activities to help students keep up academically

if a student is excluded from school, liaise with parents to ensure continuity of adult supervision afterwards make sure the student is monitored and assisted to reintegrate into normal school routine

restorative practices that bring together all parties affected by a student's actions in a shared problem-solving process programs that teach

students social,

interpersonal,

anger management

and conflict

resolution skills

approaches that promote the health and wellbeing of the school community and engage students with learning

strategies that incorporate regular monitoring, evaluation and review

Preventing behavioural issues from developing is crucially important in reducing the need for schools to use suspensions.

The most effective preventative approaches are those implemented at the level of the whole school.

Numerous programs and innovative practices are already being used by many schools to maintain their students' engagement and address challenging behaviour.

The current education policy environment seeks to promote student engagement and social inclusion.

This provides an ideal opportunity for schools to continue to make positive and proactive changes in ways of working with students.



Information about the International Youth Development Study and electronic copies of this booklet are available online at the CAH website - www.rch.org.au/cah

Equity Project; evidence-based information for schools' issues – http://ceep.indiana.edu/equity Friendly Scools and Families; social skills program – www.friendlyschools.com.au

Gatehouse Project; promotes emotional wellbeing in schools - www.gatehouseproject.com

*Response ability*; supports the social and emotional development and wellbeing of children and young people – www.responseability.org

What Works The Work Program booklet Core Issues 2: Reducing Suspensions (in publications section) – www.whatworks.edu.au

What Works Clearinghouse; scientific evidence for what works in education – http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc

The National Strategies; a practical guide for leaders in primary and secondary schools – http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk

The effect of school suspensions and arrests on subsequent adolescent antisocial behavior in Australia and the United States, by Hemphill S.A, Toumbourou J.W, Herrenkohl T.I, McMorris B.J. & Catalano R.F. in Journal of Adolescent Health 39(5) 623-784 2006

Modifiable determinants of youth violence in Australia and the United States: A longitudinal study, by Hemphill S.A, Smith, Toumbourou J.W, Herrenkohl T.I, Catalano R.F, McMorris B.J. & Romanuik H. in Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology 42 289-309 2009

Are rates of school suspension higher in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods? An Australian study, by Hemphill S.A, Toumbourou J.W, Smith R, Kendall G.E, Rowland B, Freiberg K. & Williams J.W. in Health Promotion Journal of Australia 21(1) 12-18 2010

#### Sheryl Hemphill

is a senior researcher at the Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Department of Paediatrics, The University of Melbourne and Murdoch Childrens Research Institute



John Hargreaves

is a freelance writer

and desktop publisher. He worked on the

Gatehouse Project and health promotion

in schools

for many years