



## Education

# Julia Steiny: Suspending students only makes a bad situation worse

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Schools banish kids often and self-righteously. Generally, educators and the public believe that suspensions and even expulsions are sound, necessary practices. If kids don't behave according to the rules, out they go, onto the streets where apparently they will learn how to control their impulses, anger or poor choices. Feral behavior is sent back into the wild.

Hasta la vista, baby.

I bring this up at holiday time, when people of all ages hope to belong somewhere. As mammals, we dearly want to connect with creatures who connect back to us. So banishment feels horrible. It mainly teaches us to resent or even hate the banishers. It's barbaric.

Even so, in school year 2006-07 (the latest available national data), America's schools meted out 3.2 million suspensions. That year Rhode Island's public schools kicked kids out of school for well over 60,000 days — or 167 years of class time spread among fewer than 18,000 kids. For some reason the data lumps together all 18,000 kick-outs, no matter what kind of suspension they got — out-of-school, in-school, or "alternative program." They're a subset of "bad kids" among the 152,000 students attending our public schools that year.

It gets worse. The 167 years are only for out-of-school suspensions. If you also add the days spent in in-school suspension and "alternative programing," it comes to a total of just under 85,000 days (232 years) of learning interrupted, if not completely halted.

Furthermore, over 5,000 incidents of suspension were for skipping detention. It'd be funny, if it weren't so awful.

Suspension is a holdover from seemingly-efficient factory-model schools. Defective products are rejected from the assembly line and considered "acceptable casualties" until the number of "casualties" exceeds acceptable and forces the assembly line to stop and solve the problem.

Schools set no such limits. Lots of misbehavior leads to lots of acceptable casualties. And zero-tolerance policies have driven these casualties through the roof in many schools.

Nationally about a third of the kids drop out before graduating from high school each year. Guess what? Most drop-outs have been suspended, many repeatedly.

I often hear that suspensions teach kids a lesson. Really? What? Do the kids understand the reasons why we all need to cooperate with community norms? Do the adults model those norms? Are kids coached in alternatives to acting out? Some parents coach behavior well, but frankly, fewer and fewer parents know how. You would think that by now, with all the pressure to perform, schools would have become aces at teaching social skills, if only to help kids learn the traditional subjects.

Providence's Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence works intensively with urban kids and so was able to put me in touch with two girls on suspension.

One girl said she was kicked out of school for walking too slowly in the hallway. The other was mouthy about not having a hall pass. They'd been rude, but felt they'd been provoked. Both had already been suspended repeatedly, so it's a wonder anyone thought another suspension would curb their unwanted behavior.

And what did they learn? One girl snapped, "Nothing," and the other, "I learned what was on TV." From morn to night, for days on end, both watched TV. "What else do you want me to do?" By their own admission neither was an academic star, so these suspensions were days and accumulated weeks of non-instructional time.

There are alternatives. Personally, I admire what are called "restorative practices." Google will give you details, but in essence: get to the bottom of what's going on with that kid. Why can't she focus on her classwork, get along with others, be civil, or quit acting out?

Margaret Paccione-Dyszlewski, Bradley Hospital's director of behavioral education, says "When a child is presenting challenging behavior, it is safe to assume that she is trying to communicate something. The communication could be as simple as 'I don't understand this homework' or as complex as 'I hurt because there is chaos at home.' If we take the time to look beneath the surface and hear her, she will often lead us to a solution."

So often we're just punishing the punished, the neglected, bullied or lonely.

Mind you, we should impose a consequence, when that seems appropriate, by all means. Create a restitution plan, when property is destroyed. Have a meeting with the victim, the offender and their parents, so everyone hears and understands the victim's experience and feelings. Often kids just aren't thinking and need a graphic, emotion-laden picture of what their actions mean to other people. These experiences teach. Suspensions do not.

Say to the miscreant: "You belong to us and our community. But that behavior is unacceptable. Here's why. Here are alternatives."

But don't ever banish kids from their communities. It does more harm than good.

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