

A LINE ON LIFE

8/27/95

Expelling Unruly Students? *

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To the relief of many parents, school is underway again. Many discipline worries of parents have been shifted to the school system – at least for the major portion of the day. Although this is not a problem for the vast majority of students, a few students cause major problems in school – drug or alcohol abuse, attacking teachers or other students or bringing weapons to school.

Major responses to these severe offenses are **long-term suspension** – one or two semesters – or **expulsion** – kicking them out of the school system "*forever*." (In the city of Yuma, both of these actions only occur after due process hearings and Governing Board consent.)

By federal law, possession of a firearm at school requires expulsion. Most teachers, parents and other students view this as a positive move, because it makes the school environment safer and more conducive to learning. But what happens to that suspended or expelled student? The increase in violent behavior and the bringing of weapons to school have led to stronger and more frequent recommendations to expel the students responsible. These aggressive students are usually from explosive family environments. They also tend to associate with other combative students, who intensify their behavior. Some schools take a **zero-tolerance** stance to this type of behavior – "*You screw up and you are out*."

Although this might make the school safer, the kid is still in the society. According to Arnold Goldstein, Director for Syracuse University Center for Research on Aggression –

"He's out in the community, and he has more opportunity to conduct mayhem, because he is out there with less supervision and no guidance."

In McCracken County, Kentucky, Stephen Davidson, Assistant Superintendent for their 7,000-student public school district, finds the names of expelled students on police records. According to Davidson –

"They become people we carry through welfare or the prison cell. If we can maintain services, in the end, they'll become more productive citizens."

***"We know that behavior is learned,
and learned behavior can be unlearned."***

In McCracken County, not one student has been expelled in the last three years. Instead, problem students are put into one of three alternative centers for no longer than 20 days at a time. In these centers, the staff-pupil ratio is 1-to-5. Students are aided by special education teachers, counselors, school psychologists and parents. Davidson sees the parental contribution as being very important. "*The parent or parents need to be a key player and an equal player*." However, since the problems of many of these students originate in their homes, parental cooperation may be hard to get.

Yuma Schools

In Yuma, according to Yuma District administrator, Tom Rushin, they have an alternate setting that runs a similar program. It is run by Prevention and Intervention Associates, who get "*last-chance*" students from grades 6-8 on a long-term suspension. They provide "*one-on-one*" tutoring and counseling for referred

students during typical school hours. Depending on the success of the students, the staff can recommend their return to school or expulsion.

According to Tom Wynn, Assistant Superintendent of the Crane District, they combined with other agencies to have a similar program in the town of Somerton called the South County Learning Center. However, funds dried up, and this facility no longer exists. As a substitute, various Charter School Program sites are being proposed to deal with students with special needs— including those who are suspended. These programs are expected to start in September.

In the Yuma Union High School District, according to Superintendent Jon Walk, those under long-term suspension can attend "*continuation school*" at various sites around the county. At these sites, the students can get "*one-on-one tutoring*" to help them maintain their studies. Students are required to attend twice each week. However, students or their families can request additional help. Even so, only those with alcohol or drug problems receive counseling.

Superintendent Walk says that the number of long-term suspensions has risen last year from the typical 125-150 per year. In the 1994-1995 school year, the high schools had 201 long-term suspensions and 11 expulsions. This is in a population of about 7,200 high school students. (The suspension and expulsion rates are lower in the elementary school districts.)

Critics of these programs argue that they are too expensive, especially for districts that are not well-off economically. To implement new programs to help these students, other programs may have to be eliminated for those students who are not unruly. Experts realize that the costs of these programs may be difficult to bear on top of other programs, ranging "*from racial desegregation to sex education to nutrition.*"

However, Assistant Superintendent Davidson expresses another side to this problem.

"An individual who goes to prison in Kentucky costs the taxpayers \$100,000 a year. In the public schools, the average cost per student is \$2,500 per year. That speaks volumes."

What do you think? When the next vote comes for school bonds, are you just going to think of the immediate costs? Or will you also weigh the long-term costs in terms of time, money and the waste of human potential? The choice is yours.

* Adapted from Randall Edwards' article, "Expulsion from school often backfires," [*APA Monitor*](#), February, 1995, page 41.