



The Advocate

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A newsletter on children's issues

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Calendar of Events

Events relating to helping children are available at:
www.tennessee.gov/tccy/webcalen.pdf.

TCCY

For more information on the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth and its programs, check out the website at:
www.tennessee.gov/tccy.

Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth

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Schools Seek to Create Positive Learning Climates

Ideally, school should be a sanctuary where students can grow and learn in a tranquil atmosphere, free from stresses and fears that sap their energies from development and problem solving. Tennessee’s children between the ages of 5 and 18 spend the majority of their waking hours in an educational setting. Schools are incubation centers where democracy and community are fostered; as such they need to create a climate that develops mutual respect, cooperation and mature behavior. In the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Best Practice Strategies

A systematic assessment can identify what programs, policies and processes encourage peaceful interactions in the classroom, the school and in the district. A comptroller’s report recommends targeting programs towards eighth and ninth grade, as the majority of zero tolerance incidents occur during ninth grade.

Efforts should be made to modify the school climate so it exhibits nurturance, inclusiveness, community feeling, and students feel recognized and appreciated by at least one adult in the school. An aesthetically appealing, non-institutional atmosphere in the school can also encourage a positive climate, which will in turn decrease the likelihood of violence.

The most effective type of prevention method varies by school. Interventions can be enacted on the individual level, the family level and the community level. Individual level interventions are often the easiest to implement and are most effective when they are developmentally appropriate and promote the use of skills in real life situations.

Family-level intervention includes training parents to decrease the use of coercive and dominating parenting styles that put children at risk for aggression

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and delinquency, encouraging activities that promote emotional cohesion and shared family values, and assisting families in addressing external factors that may contribute to a lack of emotional cohesion and connectedness.

Community-level interventions may occur in the peer group, the physical school environment, the school culture and norms, the neighborhood and community, or within greater society. Within peer groups, integrating students with better social skills with students who are more aggressive appears to have more positive outcomes than separating the two groups, as occurs when suspension and expulsion are used. This method promotes a decrease in antisocial behavior among at-risk youth, while maintaining prosocial behaviors among the better-socialized group. Positive relationships with any adult in the community appear to serve as a protective factor for at-risk youth, and programs that facilitate these relationships, like Big Brothers, Big Sisters, appear to be effective. Basic changes in greater society that reduce youths' access to weapons, alcohol and drugs also have a positive effect on school safety.

National Education Association Recommendations

- Reducing and eliminating bullying and harassment;
- Expanding counseling, anger management and peer mediation programs;
- Facilitating students' communication with adults about rumors and threats;
- Instructing in a way that emphasizes respect and responsibility and promotes working with adult role models in after-school programs.

The Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth Cindy Durham, Chair Nashville

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Sidney Bynum Nashville	Dana L. Lesley Chattanooga
Dennis Clark Chattanooga	Carlton Lewis Nashville
Beverly Cosley Chattanooga	Christy Little Jackson
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Charles Hutchins Greeneville	Linda O'Neal Executive Director

To encourage a peaceful, caring student environment, a school-wide discipline plan should teach and reinforce prosocial behaviors and hold children consistently and fairly accountable for unacceptable actions.

The process of school safety planning should focus on prevention, intervention and response planning and ought to include the following 10 specific components in order to ensure a comprehensive approach is taken.

- Creating school-wide prevention and intervention strategies;
- Developing emergency response planning;
- Developing school policies and understanding legal considerations;
- Creating positive school climate and cultures;
- Implementing ongoing staff development;
- Ensuring quality facilities and technology;
- Fostering school/law enforcement partnerships;
- Instituting links with mental health and social services;
- Fostering family and community involvement;
- Acquiring and utilizing resources.

Conflict resolution education focuses on teaching children the skills to communicate their interests, while focusing on the problem itself instead of the people involved and developing alternatives that benefit all parties and using trained, third-party mediators. Peer conflict-resolution programs train students in empathy, cooperation and perspective taking, as well as teaching a peaceful process to settle differences.

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Scare tactics, programs only focusing on self-esteem, segregating aggressive or anti-social students, programs focusing only on anger-management and individual counseling/intensive case work have been proven ineffective.

Schools can limit youth gang violence by consistently sharing information with the police and by implementing anti-gang interventions within the school's community. The Texas Youth Commission recommends that a flexible curriculum should be developed for academically struggling youth gang members and young at-risk youth be exposed to concepts of work, education and responsibility. Older youth gang members require access to job apprentice and remedial education programs.

Proven School Safety Programs

What works, what doesn't, and what's promising

<u>What Works</u>	<u>What Doesn't Work</u>	<u>What's Promising but Untested</u>
Perspective-taking	Scare tactics	Peer mediation
Problem-solving	Didactic programs	Schools within schools
Family behavior management	Programs focusing only on self-esteem	Mentoring
Family problem-solving	Segregating aggressive & antisocial students	Social skills training
Decreasing gun access	Programs focusing only on anger-management	Improved classroom management techniques
Student motivation	Individual counseling & intensive casework	

Source: Smith, Kahn, & Borowsky, 1999

Common Practices in Schools to Address School Safety Nationally

Public schools attempt to improve school safety in a variety of ways. When surveyed, a considerable number of schools reported having components of violence prevention programs in place during the 1999-2000 school year (the most recent year for which this information was available).

- A counseling, social work, psychological, or therapeutic activity was available in 66 percent of schools.
- Behavioral or behavior modification intervention was available in 66 percent of schools.
- Prevention curriculum, instruction or training (e.g. social skills training) was available in 65 percent of schools.
- Programs to promote a sense of community and encourage social integration among students were available in 57 percent of schools.
- Recreational, enrichment or leisure activities were available to students in 53 percent of schools.
- Student involvement in resolving student conduct problems (e.g. conflict resolution, peer mediation, student court) was present in 45 percent of schools.
- A hotline or tip line for students to report problems was available in 22 percent of schools.

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Crisis plans are in place in 96 percent of schools for one or more threats, including natural disasters.

Teachers are often involved in school safety efforts, such as classroom management, crime prevention and recognition of early warning signs of potentially violent students. During the 1999-2000 school year, 66 percent of schools trained teachers in class room management; 35 percent gave training in early warning signs of potentially violent students; and 31 percent received other crime prevention training.

Parental involvement in school safety programs is not quite as common but does occur in a number of forms. During the 1999-2000 school year, 54 percent of U.S. public schools involved parents in crime and discipline policy making; 45 percent offered training on dealing with students' problem behavior; and 21 percent directly involved parents at school to help maintain discipline.

Many schools used varying methods to limit access to campus in an effort to maintain school safety. Nearly all schools, 97 percent, required visitors to sign in; 75 percent controlled building access; 34 percent controlled access to school grounds; and 65 percent closed campus during lunch. Physical surveillance, was another common method of addressing school safety issues, as is use of staff and student identification.

School safety, which has been thrust to the forefront by some recent deaths of school staff in Tennessee, encompasses a broad range of issues, including emotional and physical bullying, intimidation, fighting, firearms, drug use and gang activity. Schools are safe places when compared to much of the areas of students' lives. However, during the 1999-2000 school year, 71 percent of public elementary and secondary schools experienced at least one violent event. The number of violent incidents in schools resulting in multiple deaths has increased, despite the fact that overall, the number of individual violent youth deaths at school has decreased since the early 90s.

According to the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 8.1 percent of Tennessee students reported carrying a weapon on school property in the past 30 days. Nearly 11 percent of Tennessee students report having participated in a physical fight at school at least once in the past year, and research indicates the same youths who are involved in fights often engage in other high-risk behaviors, such as drug use, binge drinking, carrying weapons and unsafe sex.

Prevalence of alcohol and drug use on school property is related to school safety. In the past year 26.6 percent of Tennessee students reported being offered, sold or given an illegal drug while at school. Alcohol and marijuana were the more frequently used contraband, with 3.7 percent of the state's students reporting drinking alcohol on school property in the past 30 days and 3.5 percent, using marijuana at school. Since students who use alcohol and drugs are more likely to engage in physical fighting, prevalence of these substances in schools

Proven Practices

- Teaching prosocial responses to anger and aggression with social skills training;
- Collaboration between schools and families to ensure demonstration of appropriate responses to anger;
- In-school cognitive behavioral programs;
- Teaching anger control behavioral strategies;
- Self-control and relaxation skills;
- Assertive discipline;
- Retraining social cognitive attributions;
- Parent education to unite the school with families of challenging students to benefit both parties;
- Teaching prosocial skills, rather than violent behavior, through modeling and reinforcement;
- Conflict resolution education.

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is directly related to school violence. Students are also victims of violence: 5.7 percent of students did not attend school at least once in the last 30 days because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school, and 7.4 percent have been threatened or injured by a weapon at school at least once in the past year. More than one fourth of Tennessee students, 26.7 percent, had property stolen or deliberately damaged on school property at least once in the past year. Gang activity is also of concern, as 19 percent of schools nationally reported it to be a serious problem during the 1999-2000 school year.



Legislative Efforts to Reduce Bullying

In 2005, the Tennessee State Legislature passed a bill requiring all schools to formulate a bullying prevention policy, complete with information about how the policy would be distributed. Although the state Department of Education had been providing anti-bullying technical assistance for a number of years prior to the implementation of the new law. The impact of bullying on school safety and climate is significant. Students between the ages of 8 and 15 ranked bullying as more of a problem in their lives than discrimination, racism or violence (RAND, 2001). During the 1999-2000 school year, 29 percent of public schools in the United States reported bullying as a serious problem.

Expulsion and Suspension

The Tennessee's Comptroller's Office recommended that the Legislature encourage education agencies to implement alternatives to suspension and expulsion, as research indicates that suspension is most likely to result in other suspensions and may lead to dropping out.

Expulsion and suspension are the most common reactions to school violence. Of all serious disciplinary action taken during the 1999-2000, 83 percent were suspensions longer than 5 days, and 11 percent were expulsions (with no services). The remainder were transfers to special programs.

Of the 920,562 students enrolled in Tennessee's public schools during the 2004-2005 school year, 84,724 were suspended at least once, and a total of 156,582

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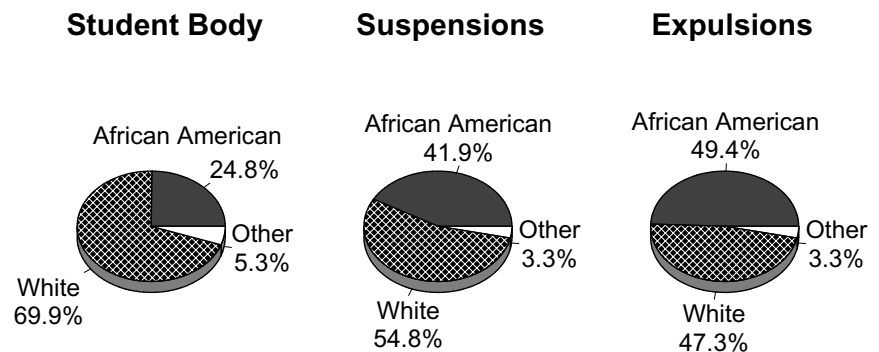
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incidents of suspension occurred. A total of 1,968 students experienced expulsion. Of the 156,582 suspensions, 46,415 or 29.6 percent were related to violence, fighting, firearms or weapon-related offenses. Another 2,063, or 1.3 percent of suspension incidents, responded to alcohol and drug related behaviors. A significant number of students, 40 percent, attributed their suspension to lack of self-control.

Of the expelled students, 502 or 25.5 percent were removed for offenses related to violence, fighting, firearms and other weapons. Another 761 or 38.7 percent of expelled students were removed for drug or alcohol related offenses.

Inequity in Suspensions and Expulsions

2004-2005 School Year



Source: Tennessee Department of Education

The Result of Zero Tolerance

Zero tolerance policies were originally established to consistently respond to certain behaviors. Although the number of students committing zero tolerance offenses in Tennessee is low – 4.5 per 1,000 students – the demographics and outcomes for this group are of serious concern, according to the Comptroller’s Office. In Tennessee as nationally, a disproportionate number of zero tolerance offenders were male: 73 percent each year since 2003. Though 24 percent of Tennessee’s student population during the 2001-02 school year was African American, this group accounted for 37 percent of zero tolerance violations. Special education students comprised only 16 percent of the student population in Tennessee, yet accounted for 20 percent of zero tolerance offences. Zero tolerance violations are also significantly higher in urban areas.

During the 2004-05 school year in Tennessee, zero tolerance violations included bringing a toy gun, a pencil, stink bombs and a laser gun to school, as well as dress code violations and false accusations against a teacher.

Though most zero tolerance policies allow superintendents to modify the penalty, the punishment is only adjusted in 16 percent of zero tolerance incidents that occur in Tennessee. Thirteen percent of zero tolerance offenders in Tennessee are expelled without a provision for placement into an alternative educational environment. Approximately 20 percent of children expelled for zero tolerance offenses do not return to school within three years.

For these reasons, in 2003 and again in 2006 the comptroller advised the General Assembly to encourage local education agencies to increase preventative programs and consider alternatives to zero-tolerance suspension.

Consequences of Suspension and Expulsion

The consequences of removing children from the classroom are well documented and extensive. Suspension has been shown to harm self-respect, stigmatize the student and increase the student’s interaction with other

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delinquents. Although educators, parents and other adults in the community discourage truancy because of its negative outcomes, expulsion and suspension reinforce the behavior and take a school-based problem into the larger community without addressing the causal factors.

Suspension and expulsion produce an education gap. Children removed from the classroom miss instructional time. There is a direct correlation between suspension and poor academic achievement, and students who have been suspended self-report less interest in school achievement than other students. In addition to preventing children from keeping up with the curriculum and class assignments and progressing to higher grades, suspensions ultimately discourage students, decreasing the likelihood of graduation. Falling grades and dropping out are well-documented outcomes of suspension.

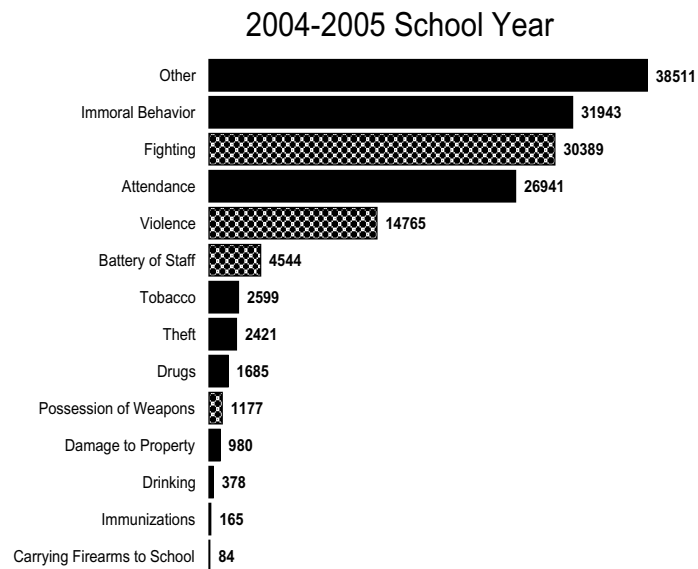
Crime data reports show that the most youth crime occurs between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. when youth are unsupervised, and suspension and expulsion result in an increased lack of adult supervision for these students and an abundance of unstructured time. Suspension has also been correlated with drug use and an increased likelihood of involvement in the legal system. Idle, unsupervised youth may turn to other delinquents, who are likely to be a negative influence. Suspension may also be a precursor to later incarceration.

Suspension and expulsion have not been proven effective. Repeat suspensions of the same student are common, indicating that suspension is not effectively changing negative behaviors. Students do not find suspension useful, with 32 percent reporting that suspension had not helped at all and that they would probably be suspended again in the future, and 37 percent stating that suspension was of little use.

Suspensions and expulsions result in a concrete financial loss. State educational aid is distributed based on attendance, and, when educational systems force children out of the classroom, they lower the average attendance. Children who have been expelled and suspended are more likely to come before the juvenile courts and subsequently be committed to state custody. During 2005-06 in Tennessee, placement in state custody carried an average cost of \$51,837 per year for children adjudicated delinquent.

Racial disparities in suspension and expulsion practices are well documented. During the 2004-05 school year in Tennessee, 69.9 percent of the student body was White and received 41.9 percent of all suspensions and 49.4 percent of expulsions. Although only 24.8 percent of students were African-American, that group received 54.8 percent of all suspensions and 47.3 percent of expulsions. School violence and suspension among minority groups have been linked to the effects of sociocultural and economic factors these groups experience.

Tennessee School Suspensions by Type



Source: Tennessee Department of Education. Note: Counts are by incident and not by the number of students.

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Sociocultural issues include consequences of racism and higher likelihood of being raised in a single parent household and community social norms, and economic factors include the increased likelihood of poverty and lower individual and household income. Other disparities in distribution of suspensions have been identified, with males, urban students and students from lower-socioeconomic families being more likely to be suspended.



It is troublesome to consider that “repeated suspensions for minor misbehavior convey a clear message to young people that the school system is authoritarian and arbitrary and does not value them as individuals.” Although suspension and expulsion may remove disruptive students from the classroom, removing children from the schools does not address the reasons behind the student’s behavior.

When asked by researchers what might be more useful than suspension, students themselves recommended “providing more classes that are more interesting and useful” and “providing classes that would help to get a job.” Counseling components of school safety programs seem promising as students suggest a need to talk about problems with peers and at home, despite evidence that counseling alone is not effective.

Conclusion

Schools are faced with the challenge of setting boundaries that clarify when healthy risk taking becomes dangerous. Also, “schools must balance their understanding of odd, silly or risky behaviors with an equal comprehension that these experiences provide adults with opportunities to teach and students with opportunities to learn and grow” (Richart, Brooks, & Soler, 2003).

Schools must take into account the abundance of external factors that also contribute to school violence, including poverty, racism, unemployment, substance abuse, easy access to weapons, inadequate or abusive parenting practices and frequent exposure to media violence.

It is encouraging that students have reported “a desire to learn alternatives to the behaviors that resulted in their suspension” (Costenbader & Markson, 1998), and thus schools ought to take advantage of the most up to date best practice strategies that match the needs of that particular educational environment.

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NOTE: This newsletter was written by TCCY intern Talia Gursky.



STATE OF TENNESSEE

PROCLAMATION

BY THE GOVERNOR

WHEREAS, the citizens of Tennessee stand firmly committed to quality afterschool programs and opportunities because they: Provide safe, challenging, engaging and fun learning experiences to help children and youth develop their social, emotional, physical, cultural and academic skills.
 Support working families by ensuring their children are safe and productive after the regular school day ends.
 Build stronger communities by involving our students, parents, business leaders and adult volunteers in the lives of our young people, thereby promoting positive relationships among children, youth, families and adults.
 Engage families, schools and diverse community partners in advancing the welfare of our children.

WHEREAS, afterschool programs in Tennessee have provided significant leadership in the area of community involvement in the education and well-being of our youth and are grounded in the principle that quality afterschool programs are key to helping our children become successful adults,

WHEREAS, Lights On Afterschool, a national celebration of afterschool programs on October 12, 2006 promotes the critical importance of quality afterschool programs in the lives of children, their families and their communities.

WHEREAS, more than 28 million children in the U.S. have parents who work outside the home, and 14.3 million children have no place to go after school.

WHEREAS, many afterschool programs across the country are facing funding shortfalls so severe that they are being forced to close their doors and turn off their lights.

WHEREAS, the Lottery for Education Afterschool Programs (LEAPs) funding provides academic enrichment opportunities for Tennessee students through unclaimed lottery winnings.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Phil Bredesen, Governor of the State of Tennessee, do hereby proclaim October 12, 2006, as

LIGHTS ON AFTERSCHOOL DAY

in Tennessee and encourage all citizens to join me in this worthy observance.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the official seal of the State of Tennessee to be affixed at Nashville on this 20th day of September, 2006.

Governor

Secretary of State



At the request of the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth Governor Bredesen proclaimed Oct. 12 Lights On Afterschool Day to highlight afterschool programs. This is the seventh annual national Lights On Afterschool celebration organized by the Afterschool Alliance.

Afterschool programs provide educational and productive activities to keep youth and communities safer.

Sixty-one percent of Tennessee children ages 6-12 live in households where all parents are employed, approximately the same percentage as in the nation. More than one in every four children is unsupervised after school.

A list of Tennessee Lights On After school activities is available online at http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/lights_on/find.cfm.