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Conflict Resolution Training as an Alternative to Suspension for Violent Behavior

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ABSTRACT The authors discuss a conflict resolution skills training program that is offered as an alternative to out-of-school suspension and pilot data regarding the program’s effectiveness in reducing acts of physical violence (fighting) among high school students. A description of the program is provided as well as results of a pre- and postintervention comparison of students suspended for physical violence who did and did not receive conflict resolution skills training. A statistically significant difference was observed between groups regarding expulsions, with the group of students going through the program receiving no expulsions. Although no other statistically significant findings were observed, several interesting trends are noted. For example, at postintervention, all students who completed the program were 4 times less likely to receive another out-of-school suspension for fighting. Also, students who completed the program received fewer postintervention disciplinary acts from the school than those who did not complete the program.

Key words: alternative to suspension, conflict resolution training, school-based research, youth violence prevention

Everyone knows that it is virtually impossible to prove a negative. Sadly, high school administrators throughout the country know that they cannot prove that a Columbine-style tragedy will not occur in their schools. Confronted with this stark reality, administrators are searching for proven approaches to violence prevention. These approaches fall into three categories: security, punishment, and school-based programs. Security approaches keep violence at bay. Punishment deters violence by sending a strong message that it will not be tolerated. School-based programs provide alternatives to violence and reduce the risk factors for violence.

The first category, security approaches, is designed to keep violence out of schools by using security guards, metal detectors, identification badges, locked campuses, and locker and book bag checks. These approaches are highly visible and immediate and certainly do prevent some incidents of violence. On the down side, however, they are expensive, and there is a risk that they will make the school feel like a fortress. Another security approach is profiling, which establishes the characteristics of potentially violent youths to identify and help them before they erupt with violence. Profiling has increasingly been questioned because it may injure innocent students (Kopka, 1997; Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001) and because it has yet to be proven that there is a profile (Futrell, 1996).

The second category, punishment, has long been used as a deterrent for violence. The most common form of punishment has been out-of-school suspension. There are, however, significant concerns about its effectiveness (Dupper & Bosch, 1996). First, suspension often does not deter future violence because many students are repeatedly suspended for fighting (De Ridder, 1991; Mayer, 1995). Second, the objectivity and fairness of out-of-school suspensions has been questioned as some groups of students, including male, minority, and academically and behaviorally challenged students, are suspended in disproportionate numbers (Foster, 1986; Kunjufu, 1986; Townsend, 2000; Uchitelle, Bartz, & Hillman, 1989). Third, suspension creates serious negative consequences for suspended students. They often perform poorly academically and cannot afford to be away from the classroom. Suspension further disempowers and isolates already marginalized students and their parents from the school (Coben, Weiss, Mulvey, & Dearwater, 1994; Cunningham, 1996; De Ridder, 1991; Gaddy & Kelly, 1984; Stretch & Crunck, 1972). The cycle of fighting, suspension, and failure can culminate in a student’s dropping out of school or being expelled (Black, 1999; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Mayer, 1995).

In an effort to take an even tougher stand against violence, President Clinton signed the Gun-Free Schools Act...
into law in 1994. The law mandates a 1-year expulsion for any student caught with a gun at schools receiving federal aid. This law set the tone for many schools to adopt zero-tolerance policies, which state that any form of violence results in expulsion (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Although the majority of schools have zero-tolerance policies, those policies are increasingly being questioned (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Expulsion can ultimately put violent students at even greater risk for careers of violence (Black, 1999; Townsend, 2000). Moreover, adopting more extreme forms of punishment may not actually make the school safer. For example, one national study that compared zero- and non-zero-tolerance schools found that more of the former had had a violent episode that required police involvement (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

The third category, violence prevention programs, encompasses a vast array of programs ranging from climate improvement strategies to programs that provide skills-based training, which is generally designed for all students. Unfortunately for high school administrators, most of these programs target elementary schools, leaving only limited choices for high schools. Moreover, very few of those high school options have been tested empirically (Thorton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Some commonly used programs, particularly peer mediation, have even been shown to be ineffective (Gottfredson, 1997).

So, how are administrators going to develop comprehensive violence prevention efforts? They could simply use all three approaches; however, such an effort would not be practical because the approaches work in different and not necessarily complementary ways. Moreover, a comprehensive violence-prevention program must attack the spectrum of school violence that includes murder, physical fighting, and bullying. Finally, the individual students who commit these acts of violence vary greatly and, therefore, should be handled differently (Cortines, 1996; Futrell, 1996).

The emphasis on early intervention is predicated on the belief that the precursors to violence, particularly aggression, appear early in childhood and need to be addressed as soon as possible (Buka & Earls, 1993). Not acknowledged in this hypothesis is the fact that, although most seriously violent acts are committed by so-called early-onset offenders (Flannery & Singer, 1999), still 40% of violent youths are so-called late-onset offenders (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). They show no precursors to violence and do not commit their first violent act until adolescence. There is a serious dearth of violence prevention programs for these late-onset offenders (Thornton et al., 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

A comprehensive violence prevention effort must also take into account the fact that adolescent violence exists in several forms and has several causes (Elliott, Huizinga, & Morse, 1986; Garbarino, 1999; Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1996). Tolan and Guerra (1994) defined four patterns of adolescent violence: psychopathological, predatory, situational, and relationship. Psychopathological violence, which is rare, is committed by seriously disturbed and perhaps chemically imbalanced adolescents. It is often lethal and represents the violence that administrators most want to keep out of schools. Predatory violence is perpetrated to obtain some gain. It can involve assault with bodily injury, armed robbery, and rape. Although estimates suggest that 20% of adolescents will commit an act of predatory violence, most of this violence is perpetrated by 5–8% of male and 3–6% of female adolescents (Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1990). Predatory violence involves early-onset offenders who have multiple risk factors. To be treated effectively, predatory violence requires early and intensive intervention (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). As such, rates of predatory violence are not likely to respond to school-based violence prevention programs.

More than half of all violence is situational or relationship violence (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Situational violence occurs in response to a set of unusual circumstances, and relationship violence arises from interpersonal disputes. Both types fit the pattern that is frequently found in schools: An adolescent finds him- or herself backed into a situation in which violence seems like the only alternative, or a conflict between students who know each other escalates until violence becomes the attempted solution. The first act of violence for many students in high school is an episode of situational or relationship violence, which would make them late-onset offenders. A survey of principles listed these types of physical conflicts as the third most pressing problem in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

A comprehensive violence prevention effort must address the question of which approaches work for which violent acts and which violent students (Bemak & Keys, 2000; Thornton et al., 2000). Security approaches target all students but are really designed to avert lethal acts of psychopathological and predatory violence. Punitive approaches, particularly zero tolerance, target all students. These approaches can remove a predator from school, but they also remove late-onset offenders who get into fights while engaging in situational and or relationship violence. Increasingly, the negative consequences of zero tolerance for these students are being questioned (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). However, administrators face a dilemma because they have few options for dealing with this sort of violence. Universal programs such as climate improvements and conflict skills training, which target all students, have not been shown to reduce violence among at-risk students (Gottfredson, 1997). Secondary prevention programs that target at-risk students who are violent are critically needed. The group that is most likely to be helped by such programs is that of the late-onset offenders who engage in acts of situational or relationship violence. The question is, how?

When a student is caught fighting at school and some disciplinary action must be taken, there is a major opportunity for intervention with late-onset offenders. Rather than using punishment, schools could modify the disciplinary code to...
Alternative to Suspension for Violent Behavior

The structure and format of the Alternative to Suspension for Violent Behavior (ASVB) is predicated on research findings that have provided substantial evidence that violence is largely learned and consequently can be prevented through teaching alternatives to violence (Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994; Eron & Slaby, 1994). This theory does not deny that the factors contributing to violence are varied and that no one factor is the sole cause of violence (Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994; Eron & Slaby, 1994; Garbarino, 1999). For example, although it is true that some acts of violence do result from extreme anger or lack of impulse control, still, “Inadequate impulse control puts an individual at risk for violence only if violent acts are that person’s preferred response choice because of previous learning experiences” (Eron & Slaby, 1994, pp. 3–4).

The program components at the secondary prevention level that have been empirically proven to reduce violence or the risk factors for it include teaching social problem-solving and thinking skills (Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1996; Thorton et al., 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). These skills are taught in recognition of the fact that violence often occurs when young people lack behavioral alternatives (Kellermann, Fuqua-Whitley, & Rivara, 1996; Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1996; Rotheram, 1982).

Several model programs also include parent training. Because research has shown that some of the most significant risk factors for violence originate in the family (Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Farrington, Zhang, & Maguin, 1993), it is critical to make the ASVB a family intervention. Reed (1981) found that the family affected students’ attitudes and beliefs about conflict, and he identified lack of parental supervision, responsibility, and involvement as the most influential family issues. Weissberg and Greenberg (1987) linked poor parenting skills and family disharmony with adolescent problems. Engaging the family and changing its beliefs and practices about conflict and violence can contribute to changing a student’s use of violence (Bemak & Keys, 2000; Cortines, 1996; Thayer, 1996).

Because there was no program in existence at the secondary level that could be readily adapted for the ASVB, we created our own, incorporating the practices just described. The skill-building and thinking-skills components are grounded in conflict resolution theory.

The ASVB was developed at the Family Institute at Northwestern University and is offered through one of its satellite offices near the participating high school. Each family is assigned a trainer. Although this individual format is labor intensive, the special attention that alienated youths receive seems to be a factor in its success. For agencies that have insufficient resources to offer an individual format, a group format is available.

In the setting in which this research occurred, when a student is suspended, he or she meets with the assistant principal, who describes the ASVB and invites the family to enroll. In return, the student’s suspension is reduced (10 to 5, 5 to 2, or 3 to 1 day[s]). If the family agrees to participate, the student and a parent must sign a contract and contact the Family Institute within 48 hr to arrange a first meeting with a trainer. The student is allowed to return to school immediately after the reduced suspension is served. If a student fails to complete the program, the balance of the suspension must be served.

The ASVB uses a 36-page skills manual titled “Making the Smart Choice: Tools for Resolving Conflict.” The manual is covered in 6 hr, generally spread over four 90-min sessions. Our assessment of how much effort families would invest in return for a reduced suspension dictated the 6-hr time frame of the program.

The core premises and skills of conflict resolution are derived from the principles and practices of mediation. Mediation begins with the premise that conflict is inevitable and destructive only when it is handled inappropriately. Further, the mediator assumes that the parties in a conflict are deadlocked, because the positions they adopt are irreconcilable. In other words, the only allowable outcome results in one person winning and the other person losing (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1981). Violence enters into a conflict either when the winner uses violence to get his or her way or when the loser reacts to defeat with violence.

The goal of conflict resolution strategies is to find a solution to the conflict whereby both parties get what they want and avoid violence in the process. Attempting to do this by reconciling opposing positions usually leads to further polarization; therefore, the parties must learn to articulate the needs that underlie their positions. Negotiation can then take place around the respective needs of the parties. As long as the needs of both sides are met, they can drop their positions, and both can have a satisfying outcome.

These premises of conflict resolution are easy to articulate and to accept, but implementing them requires considerable cognitive and emotional skill. The cognitive skills that are required are perspective taking and active listening.
One section of the manual is devoted to these skills. In addition, for many adolescents, excessive emotion is a major stumbling block to understanding and communicating their needs. In particular, anger can trigger physiological flooding, which impairs rational thought. The manual contains a section on the skills of anger management. Finally, these skills are tied together with a section on problem solving.

Although the ASVB was originally designed for students suspended for physical violence, it can be used with students who are suspended for other reasons. Accordingly, assistant principals at the host high school had the discretion to refer to the program any student whom they believed might benefit.

Method

Participants

The host high school for this study was a public high school with a student population of over 3,000, located in the western suburbs of Chicago. The school has a two-campus system, with freshman and sophomores attending one campus and juniors and seniors the other. Drawn from 10 surrounding communities, the student body is predominantly White and middle class. There is, however, a range of socioeconomic levels and some minority representation. Some of the 10 communities are of lower or lower middle-class socioeconomic status, and African American and Hispanic students constitute about 3% and 4% of the population, respectively.

The sample included students who were suspended between August 1997 and December 1998 (N = 165). The bulk of the suspensions for the 1st school year were from the freshman/sophomore campus, because the assistant principals at this campus were more closely aligned with the goals of this new program. The sample from the 2nd school year included all suspended students.

Research Hypotheses

The ASVB program has four target outcomes. The first and most salient outcome is a reduced rate of resuspension for acts of physical violence. The second is a reduced rate of resuspension for nonphysical violence. Because the ASVB teaches conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, the third target outcome is a lower rate of resuspension for any reason for students who complete the program compared to the rate for those who do not. Finally, the impact of the program might extend to other disciplinary acts, so a fourth outcome is a lower rate of disciplinary acts for students who complete the program compared with those who do not. Accordingly, we examined one 4-part hypothesis in this pilot study: Compared with students who did not complete the program, those who did would have fewer resuspensions for physical violence, fewer resuspensions for nonphysical violence, fewer total resuspensions, and fewer disciplinary acts.

Design

A repeated measures design with a nonequivalent comparison group was implemented. For all suspended students, archival data on disciplinary records were gathered during the summer after each year of the study. All out-of-school suspensions as well as other types of disciplinary acts (e.g., after-school detentions, Saturday detentions, and in-school suspensions) were included in the collection of data.

Data were gathered for all students who received out-of-school suspensions during the entire 1997–1998 school year and during the first semester of the 1998–1999 school year. A 3-year funded study commenced in the second semester of that year, and all additional data and refinements to it were made part of that study, which will be reported on in another article.

There were 35 reasons for which a student could receive an out-of-school suspension at the host high school. These were divided into three categories: acts of physical violence (physical confrontation), acts of violence that are nonphysical (e.g., intimidation, verbal confrontation), and nonviolent acts (e.g., smoking, drug use).

Data Analyses

Pre- and postintervention disciplinary data were examined for students who did and did not participate in the program. For a further examination of the data, we aggregated students into six groups: three groups of students who completed the ASVB program and another three groups who did not. Group 1 consisted of students who were suspended for fighting who attended the ASVB (n = 25). Group 2 consisted of students who were suspended for fighting who did not attend the ASVB (n = 41). Group 3 consisted of students who were suspended for other acts of violence who attended the ASVB (n = 7). Group 4 consisted of students who were suspended for other acts of violence who did not attend the ASVB (n = 36). Group 5 consisted of students who were suspended for nonviolent acts who attended the ASVB (n = 10). Group 6 consisted of students who were suspended for nonviolent acts who did not attend the ASVB (n = 46). Groups 3 and 5 had small sample sizes because these students were not suspended for fighting, and, therefore, there was no mandate to refer them to the program. Assistant principals had the discretion to refer these students and did so only sporadically.

To create an internally consistent and logical method for distinguishing the preintervention phase from the postintervention phase, we identified a point in time for each suspension. We referred to this point in time as the “index suspension.” For students suspended for fighting (Groups 1 and 2), the index suspension was the out-of-school suspension that resulted in the referral (as with Group 1) or the opportunity for referral (as with Group 2) to the ASVB. For all other suspended students (Groups 3–6), the index suspension was identified as the first out-of-school suspension of the school year.
Because students were suspended at different times during the school year, to allow for group comparisons, it was necessary to create five indices that mitigated the factor of time. These indices were the rate of a target disciplinary act and were measured as the number of those acts per school year.

First, the physical violence index (PVI) measured the rate of out-of-school suspensions for physical violence per year. Second, the nonphysical violence index (NPVI) measured the rate of nonphysically-violent, out-of-school suspensions per year. Third, the all violence index (AVI) measured the rate of violent out-of-school suspensions per year. And fourth, the nonviolent index (NVI) measured the rate of non-violent out-of-school suspensions per year. On four indices, the PVI, NPVI, AVI, and NVI, only a postintervention index was computed. For the disciplinary acts index (DAI), which is described below, a preintervention and postintervention index was computed.

The DAI, our fifth index, measured the rate of all disciplinary acts per year. It was computed by summing the number of after-school detentions, Saturday detentions, and in-school suspensions, and then adjusting for time. The time factor was equalized for the preintervention DAI by dividing the sum of the relevant disciplinary acts by the number of weeks in the school year to the point of the index suspension and then multiplying by the number of weeks in the school year. The postintervention DAI was computed by dividing the number of weeks from the index suspension to the end of the school year and multiplying by the number of weeks in the school year. The pre- and postintervention comparisons were of the rate that occurred during the school year.

Results

In this section, we identified demographic information for the entire sample to allow the reader to explore who gets suspended, when, and for what reasons. These demographics favorably compare with other samples from previous research on school suspension (Dupper & Bosch, 1996; Ekstrom, 1986; Hausman, Pierce, & Briggs, 1996). We then explore the data from Groups 1 and 2, both suspended for physical confrontation, with Group 1 participating in the program and Group 2 not. From there, we examine the remaining sample of suspended students. The other four groups are examined, as are a treatment and no-treatment aggregation, and findings are reported.

Demographics

During the year and a half of school included in the pilot study, 165 students were suspended from the host high school (see Table 1). Eighty-two percent (n = 136) of the participants were men and 18% were women (n = 29). Of these 165 students, 10% were African American (n = 16) and 12% were Hispanic (n = 20). The data indicate that African American and Hispanic youths were disproportionately represented among suspended students. African American students were twice as likely as, and Hispanic students were three times more likely than, White students to be represented in the sample of suspended students.

This trend of disproportionate representation by minority students was even more evident when we examined the distribution by race among students suspended for physical violence (see Groups 1 and 2, Table 1) and among students suspended for violence other than fighting (see Groups 3 and 4, Table 1). Suspension rates increased to a high of 22% for African Americans students, or seven times the school population rate, and 20% for Hispanic students, or five times their representation in the student body. Eighty-four percent of the participants were from the freshman/sophomore campus. Although these numbers are not representative of a pattern

| Table 1.—Descriptive Variables, by Entire Sample and by Group |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Variable        | Entire sample   | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    |
| Gender          |                 |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Male            | 136 (82)        | 17   | 68   | 34   | 83   | 71   | 100  |
| Female          | 29 (18)         | 8    | 32   | 7    | 17   | 4    | 11   |
| Race            |                 |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| African American| 16 (10)         | 16   | 16   | 22   | 14   | 3    | 0    |
| Hispanic/Latino | 20 (12)         | 5    | 20   | 5    | 12   | 3    | 8    |
| Caucasian       | 122 (74)        | 15   | 60   | 25   | 61   | 5    | 71   |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 3 (2) | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 2    |
| Other           | 3 (2)           | 0    | 2    | 5    | 1    | 14   | 0    |
| Class year      |                 |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Senior          | 7 (4)           | 12   | 5    | 1    | 14   | 1    | 3    |
| Junior          | 18 (11)         | 2    | 8    | 3    | 7    | 2    |
| Sophomore       | 50 (30)         | 39   | 11   | 27   | 27   | 4    |
| Freshman        | 90 (54)         | 44   | 25   | 61   | 0    | 18   | 50   |

Note. N = 165. Group 1 (n = 25) physical violence—suspension with the Alternative to Violent Behavior (ASVB) program; Group 2 (n = 41) physical violence—suspension, no ASVB; Group 3 (n = 7) other violence—suspension (nonfighting) with ASVB; Group 4 (n = 38) other violence—suspension (nonfighting), no ASVB; Group 5 (n = 10) nonviolence—suspension with ASVB; Group 6 (n = 46) nonviolence—suspension, no ASVB.
because of the underuse of the program on the junior/senior campus during the 1st year, underclassmen are still much more likely to be suspended than are upperclassmen.

The evidence indicated that fights occurred between students who knew each other. Fifty-three percent of participants got into fights with students they knew (see Table 2). For Groups 1 and 2, this percentage jumped to 76% and 68%, respectively. By contrast, the students in Groups 3 and 4 were less involved with other students but instead were involved in an altercation with a teacher 42% and 50% of the time, respectively. These incidents were not fights but were acts such as insubordination, verbal confrontation, or gross insubordination. When the same incidents involved another student, they were acts of intimidation or threats of bodily harm.

On average, students received their “index” out-of-school suspension within the first 16 weeks of school (see Table 3). For students who were suspended for fighting and who did not complete the ASVB, their index suspension happened an average of 4 weeks earlier. This difference was also found with those students who were suspended for other violent acts besides fighting. Students suspended for nonviolent acts (Groups 5 and 6) on average were suspended later in the school year than the sample average.

**Significant Findings and Important Trends: Groups 1 and 2**

Differences found between pre- and postintervention results were affected by small sample size and low incidences of reoccurrence of postintervention disciplinary acts. Statis-

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**Table 2.—Confrontation (Index Suspension) Information, by Entire Sample and Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Entire sample</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation with friend</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student's involvement in confrontation

| Instigated                                   | 54 | 52 | 14 | 64 | 15 | 58 | 4 | 80 | 9 | 90 |
| Reacted                                      | 23 | 22 | 8 | 36 | 11 | 42 | 1 | 20 | 1 | 10 |
| Missing data                                 | 32 | 19 |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |

**Note.** N = 165. Group 1 (n = 25) physical violence—suspension with the Alternative to Violent Behavior (ASVB) program; Group 2 (n = 41) physical violence—suspension, no ASVB; Group 3 (n = 7) other violence—suspension (nonfighting) with ASVB; Group 4 (n = 36) other violence—suspension (nonfighting), no ASVB.

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**Table 3.—Index Suspension Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
<th>Group 4</th>
<th>Group 5</th>
<th>Group 6</th>
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<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of index suspension (in days)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks of school at index suspension</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** N = 165. Group 1 (n = 25) physical violence—suspension with the Alternative to Violent Behavior (ASVB) program; Group 2 (n = 41) physical violence—suspension, no ASVB; Group 3 (n = 7) other violence—suspension (nonfighting) with ASVB; Group 4 (n = 36) other violence—suspension (nonfighting), no ASVB; Group 5 (n = 10) nonviolence—suspension (nonfighting), no ASVB; Group 6 (n = 46) nonviolence—suspension, no ASVB.
tically significant differences between groups were not observed, but important trends in the data were identified. These trends lead to refinements in our 3-year study.

Group 1 averaged higher on the pretest DAI (M = 4.07) than Group 2 did (M = 3.3; see Table 4). At postintervention, Group 1 reported a 2.46 change for the rate of disciplinary acts, whereas Group 2 reported a 5.5 change. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed on the four dependent variables (postintervention DAI, PVI, AVI, and NVI). The independent variables were groups and the covariate variable was the preintervention DAI. The observed significance level for the Wilks's lambda test indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between group means on the dependent variables.

Important trends in the data were identified and have guided our efforts in the more rigorous 3-year study. For instance, on the PVI (see Table 5), Group 1 was three times better than Group 2 (.06 vs .18). More than twice as many students in Group 2 were resuspended than in Group 1 (5 vs. 12; see Table 5). Finally, no students from Group 1 were expelled from school, whereas 2 were expelled from Group 2 (see Table 5).

### Significant Findings and Important Trends: All Groups

Similar to the data analysis for Groups 1 and 2, a MANOVA was performed on the four dependent variables (postintervention DAI, PVI, AVI, and NVI). The independent variables were groups, and the covariate variable was the preintervention DAI. The observed significance level for the Wilks's lambda test failed to reject the null hypothesis of differences between groups. A third MANOVA was conducted with a treatment/nontreatment variable as the independent variable. Here, too, the Wilks's lambda results failed to reject the null hypothesis, which indicated no statistically significant differences for the treatment and no treatment groups on the means of the dependent variables.

A chi-square test compared the number of expulsions of students who received the ASVB with figures for those who did not receive the ASVB. A statistically significant difference was observed between the two groups, \( \chi^2(1, N = 165) = 86.14, p < .001 \). No students from the ASVB group were expelled, but 7 were expelled from the comparison group (see Table 5).

Analyses of out-of-school resuspensions (see Table 4) for the six groups and the pooled treatment and nontreatment groups indicated a trend of treatment groups faring better than nontreatment groups on the three out-of-school suspension indices (PVI, NPVI, and NVI). On the NPVI, Group 3 was superior to Group 4 (1.37 vs. 1.45); on the NVI, Group 5 was superior to Group 6 (.54 vs .93); and on all four indices, the pooled treatment group was superior to the nontreatment group. Students in Group 1 were two times less likely to be resuspended than students in Group 2, five

### Table 4.—Pretest and Posttest Means and Medians for the Disciplinary Act Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>6.89</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>6.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 6</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No treatment</td>
<td>7.46</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 165. Group 1 (n = 25) physical violence—suspension with the Alternative to Violent Behavior (ASVB) program; Group 2 (n = 41) physical violence—suspension, no ASVB; Group 3 (n = 7) other violence—suspension (nonfighting) with ASVB; Group 4 (n = 36) other violence—suspension (nonfighting), no ASVB; Group 5 (n = 10) nonviolence—suspension with ASVB; Group 6 (n = 46) nonviolence—suspension, no ASVB. Treatment (n = 42); no treatment (n = 123).

### Table 5.—Resuspension Information, by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>No. of students resuspended</th>
<th>Resuspensions for fighting</th>
<th>Resuspensions for violent acts</th>
<th>Resuspensions for all violent acts</th>
<th>Resuspensions for nonviolent acts</th>
<th>Total no. of resuspensions</th>
<th>No. of students expelled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>71 .84</td>
<td>69 .76</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>4 .27</td>
<td>5 .33</td>
<td>5 .38</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>5 .24</td>
<td>10 .42</td>
<td>10 .49</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>1 .41</td>
<td>6 .13</td>
<td>7 .17</td>
<td>3 .83</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2 .11</td>
<td>26 .14</td>
<td>28 .156</td>
<td>25 .117</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1 .27</td>
<td>1 .27</td>
<td>2 .54</td>
<td>2 .54</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6 .32</td>
<td>12 .53</td>
<td>18 .87</td>
<td>24 .93</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3 .17</td>
<td>11 .45</td>
<td>14 .62</td>
<td>10 .49</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No treatment</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>13 .21</td>
<td>43 .71</td>
<td>58 .93</td>
<td>59 .85</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. PVI = physical violence index; NPVI = nonphysical violence index; AVI = all violence index; and NVI = nonviolence index. N = 165. Group 1 (n = 25) physical violence—suspension with the Alternative to Violent Behavior (ASVB) program; Group 2 (n = 41) physical violence—suspension, no ASVB; Group 3 (n = 7) other violence—suspension (nonfighting) with ASVB; Group 4 (n = 36) other violence—suspension (nonfighting), no ASVB; Group 5 (n = 10) nonviolence—suspension with ASVB; Group 6 (n = 46) nonviolence—suspension, no ASVB.
times less likely to be resuspended than students in Group 4, and more than four times less likely to be resuspended than students in Group 6 (see Table 5).

Although sample-size differences call into question the confidence with which one can make the argument, still the rate of resuspension for the pooled treatment group receiving the ASVB was almost half the rate of those who did not receive the ASVB. Finally, those students who received the program were four times less likely to be resuspended out of school for fighting. These trends warrant further investigation.

Discussion

On most measures reported, students who participated in the ASVB fared better than those who did not. They were resuspended less frequently for physical and nonphysical violence, their DAI scores were lower, and they were not expelled, whereas 7 students from the pooled nontreatment group were expelled. The goals of the ASVB—to reduce violence by providing a secondary prevention program for at-risk, late-onset offenders—appear to have been modestly met.

Yet, the findings must be held in perspective. Although the study contained comparison groups consisting of students who were suspended for similar reasons (who either refused or were not offered participation in the program), the assignment of the groups was not random, leaving the possibility that some difference between the accepters and refusers explains the results. Because we used archival data (for this pilot study, we gathered no data that enabled us to compare students. In an ongoing study funded by the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority (IVPA) to further evaluate the ASVB, Masse (2000) conducted a qualitative study to determine why families accept or refuse the program. She found that the decision to refuse was primarily related to a defensive posture that the student and parent took toward the school over the fight. Accepters also seemed to have clear educational goals and valued the reduced suspension rates, whereas refusers did not see this connection or let the student decide whether to participate in the program. In the IVPA study, randomization is addressed by the designation of two treatment conditions: one in which the standard ASVB program is delivered to the student and his or her family and another in which a modified version is delivered to the individual student only. A random sample of students from the general population also serves as another comparison group.

If the ASVB is responsible for the differences found between the treatment and nontreatment groups, several possibilities could account for the differences: the actual skills training, the way the family came together through the program to respond to the suspension, or the way the school responded to the accepters, which may have increased attachment to the school. The bottom line is that the ASVB is not simply a discrete intervention targeted at discrete violent youth. Rather, it is also a systemic intervention that affects the youth, their families, and the culture of the school. This multilevel approach is exactly what the violence prevention research defines as necessary for good outcome. It also makes outcomes in field research that much more difficult to evaluate (Thornton et al., 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

A closer look at the data reveals some interesting findings. A comparison of physically violent and nonphysically violent students reveals that the latter are disciplined more frequently, perhaps putting them at higher risk for becoming disaffected about school. For physically violent students (Groups 1 and 2), the data suggest that the out-of-school suspension serves as a wake-up call and that both the treatment and the nontreatment groups are not often resuspended for physical violence (there were six resuspensions for physical violence). On the other hand, in Groups 3 and 4 (nonphysical violence) there were 32 resuspensions for nonphysical violence.

This result suggests that several hypotheses should be tested in future research. Perhaps nonphysically violent students constitute a different group of students. Alternatively, because their brand of violence is more often directed at adults in the school, they may be labeled differently and, therefore, targeted for discipline more often. Finally, their attachment to the school may be eroded by their disciplinary problems, making them more vulnerable to trouble. We suggest that schools should be equally concerned with both physical and nonphysical violence.

The finding that the rate of discipline increases as the year progresses is troublesome. It suggests that the most heavily disciplined students are on a negative trajectory toward leaving school because of the sheer accumulation of trouble. Identifying and slowing down this process should be a prime objective of problem-solving strategies directed at at-risk students.

The introduction of the ASVB—a program that modifies the disciplinary code—into a high school has had interesting effects. Its very presence challenges the assumptions that discipline is just a punishment and that it functions only as a deterrent. It introduces the concept of discipline as problem solving. In addition, establishing the ASVB heightened the realization that some risk factors to attachment were embedded in the climate of the school. This realization triggered the creation of a larger initiative to change school climate. Known as the Peaceable Schools Initiative, this effort includes in-service training for teachers on peaceable classroom practices, student-led programs to improve climate, and community intervention. The consequent shift in school climate may positively affect the marginalized students in the school, who are most likely to fight and get suspended (Breunlin, Miller Lieber, Simon, & Cimmerarusti, 2001).

The ASVB has several attractive features for schools. First, because it is an off-campus program, attendance does not result in any missed classes. Second, because of its fee-for-service arrangement, it costs the school very little. Local agencies wishing to strengthen their ties to a high school bear the cost to set up and deliver the program. This
arrangement presupposes that most families have the means to pay a modest fee and that an agency can deliver the service for that cost. With lower income families, the school may have to provide scholarships for some students. These costs may well be offset by the lower administrative costs that result because students who complete the program are disciplined less frequently.

REFERENCES


De Ridder, L. M. (1991). In-school and alternative programs are better: How suspension and expulsion contribute to dropping out. The Education Digest, 56, 44-47.


