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Alternatives to Suspensions: Rationale and Recommendations

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Suspensions are often used as an individual disciplinary consequence in attempts to reduce problem behaviors in the future. However, suspensions have shown to be less effective for students with specific behavioral challenges and problems. When examining suspensions in the context of behaviorist and social-ecological learning theories, suspending may be inappropriate and ineffective to promote learning or behavioral compliance, specifically for students with behavioral skill deficits. A literature review of effective prevention methods (e.g., positive behavior supports) informs a potential paradigm shift in how student misbehavior may be effectively addressed. A proposed model for alternatives to suspensions is presented, with special attention to implications and guidelines for practitioners. Additionally, a pilot initiative implementing alternatives to suspensions is discussed, and a case study serves as an example for recommendations in replacing punitive discipline practices with proactive, learning opportunities.

KEYWORDS alternatives to suspension, school discipline, positive behavioral supports, student behavior problems

Many schools in the United States use suspension (requiring the student to leave school for a designated amount of time) as a reaction to or punishment for student disciplinary infractions. In 2006, approximately 1 out of every 14 students (7%) was suspended from school at least once during the school
Alternatives to Suspensions

year (U.S. Department of Education, 2008c). Over the past few decades, suspension rates have been increasing due, in part, to zero-tolerance policies in which students are suspended for disciplinary violations ranging in severity (Brown, 2007; Mental Health America, 2009). The percentage of United States public schools using out-of-school suspensions or removal with no curriculum or additional services provided increased from 34% in 1999/2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b) to 41% in 2007/08 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a). However, there is no empirical evidence to support the alleged deterrent effect of suspensions (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Moreover, suspensions appear to be counterproductive, as research has demonstrated that students who get suspended have a variety of negative outcomes including associated increases in problem behaviors (Mayer, 1995; Sprott, Jenkins, & Doob, 2005), missed academic instruction time (Brown, 2007), and are more likely to be suspended again (Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010) and incarcerated (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005). Such a pattern has been termed the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Christle et al., 2005; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009). Escalating punitive consequences have proven ineffective for incarcerated youth; moreover, the high rates of recidivism following incarceration further belie the logic that penalizing consequences will modify individual behaviors (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Schools do not use a one-size-fits-all approach to academic instruction. Students are taught according to grade and ability level based on considerations regarding intellectual development and different learning abilities and needs. A similar rationale should support teaching behavior and discipline since children also have different backgrounds and capacities in these areas as well. While suspensions may work for some students who fail to reoffend after being suspended once (Atkins et al., 2002), theory and related research shows that suspensions may be less effective for students with particular needs and histories. For example, students who have behavioral and emotional disabilities (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006), problems with aggression, hyperactivity, and social skills (Atkins et al., 2002), and negative experiences with school and academics (Scott, Nelson, & Liapusin, 2001) are less likely to positively change their behavior as a result of being suspended. Therefore, similar to modified approaches to academic instruction, schools should not use a one-size-fits-all approach to discipline. An alternatives to suspensions (ATS) model that promotes learning and reduces future incidents of behavior problems is needed.

THEORETICAL RATIONALE FOR AN ATS MODEL

Dupper, Theriot, and Craun (2009) described the goals that out-of-school suspension as an educational practice is designed to accomplish, as follows:
(a) remove the offending student, (b) provide temporary relief to teachers and administrators, and (c) get the attention of parents. Similarly, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2003) stated “suspension and expulsion from school are used to punish students, alert parents, and protect other students and school staff” (p. 1206). Thus, rather than conceptualizing suspensions within a learning framework (i.e., what the students gain or learn as a result of being suspended), it appears that the goals of suspension ignore the problem in favor of a temporary solution. With the exception of when a student presents an immediate threat (e.g., possession of a weapon), the logic of sending a student home as a disciplinary infraction does not seem clear, especially when what students are learning and gaining (or not gaining) from suspensions is examined (Mizell, 1978). By examining the function of suspensions within various learning frameworks, including a behaviorist perspective and a social-ecological perspective, an explanation is provided as to why suspensions may lead to undesirable and counterproductive outcomes.

Suspensions Through the Lens of Behaviorist and Social-Ecological Theories of Learning

Wheeler and Richey (2005) described the behaviorist model as recognizing “that all behavior serves a function and has evolved as a direct result of the individual’s learning history coupled with interactions within their environment” (Sulzer Azaroff & Mayer, 1991, pp. 14–15). Behaviorist theory refers to how stimuli and reinforcements can change and affect behavior in a classical conditioning framework (Sharf, 2008). By pairing stimuli with certain reinforcements, the stimuli may invoke a new type of response depending on the paired reinforcement. Similarly, the Law of Effect states, “if a behavior produces a favorable outcome on the environment, it is more likely to be repeated in the future” (Wheeler & Richey, p. 14).

Many discipline models reflect the principles of behaviorist theory, in which an undesirable consequence is given (e.g., spanking, a fee/ticket) in response to an undesired behavior (e.g., breaking the rules, speeding). Considering suspensions through the behaviorist perspective of learning, unacceptable behavior is conceptualized as, for example, initiating a physical fight, disrespecting a teacher, or destroying school property. The associated consequence, suspension, should serve as a punishment and reduce the behavior from reoccurring. However, for some students, the consequence of being suspended is a reinforcer (increases the likelihood of the behavior) rather than a punishment (decreases the likelihood of the behavior), as the suspended students perceive suspensions as an “officially sanctioned school holiday” (Rossow & Parkinson, 1999, as cited by Dupper et al., 2009).
Students who are suspended and expelled often have poor past academic experiences; therefore, it is likely that being required to leave school for a determined amount of time is not a punishment (Brown, 2007). Scott et al. (2001) described how academic tasks could become an aversive experience for students who demonstrate challenging behaviors in the classroom. Scott and colleagues cite research showing that children with behavior and academic deficits are more likely to receive negative and/or punitive interactions with their teachers and less engaged instruction time. Consequently, when a student views suspension as a school sanctioned holiday, the suspension becomes a reinforcer of problem behaviors. Some students may experience suspension as a punishment; however, a lack of established research on positive outcomes of suspensions (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Losen & Skiba, 2010), combined with research on high rates of recidivism of problem behaviors proceeding suspensions (Mayer, 1995; Sprott et al., 2005; Theriot et al., 2010), suggests that for many students suspension is not having the desired impact and could be actually reinforcing for some.

The social-ecological perspective values the importance of how individual behavior is influenced by their various environments, including home, school, and the community (Wheeler & Richey, 2005). From this perspective, it is critical to examine relevant social contexts, such as a student’s home environment, and their potential impact on child learning. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, students who are suspended are less likely to have supervision at home, and they are more likely to come from homes in or near the poverty level, to come from a single parent family, and to have a variety of home-life stressors (Advocates for Children and Youth, 2006; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Bruns, Moore, Stephan, Pruitt, & Weist, 2005). Additionally, in a study examining students in special education, students who were more frequently suspended were more likely to have parents who themselves expressed low school satisfaction (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007). Despite the good intentions of most parents, it is possible that students who are suspended will not learn from their actions or receive attention and consequences in the way that many administrators anticipate. Parents may be less likely to be at home to discipline the child during the suspension, or they may pay less attention to the suspension due to various other pressing sociological stressors (e.g., poverty, single parenthood; Advocates for Children and Youth, 2006; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Bruns et al., 2005) or their own lack of satisfaction with the school system. In considering learning and social-ecological theories and avoiding a one-size-fits-all disciplinary approach, alternative methods of reacting to behavioral problems may prove beneficial.
INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCE SUSPENSIONS

The literature on positive behavior support interventions (PBIS) represents a recent trend in education that has shown a variety of effects on student behavior and provides insight on potentially effective ways to reduce suspensions. PBIS emphasizes a proactive, learning, prevention approach (rather than a punitive approach) to respond to behavior problems (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010). Similar to how students are taught other skills (e.g., reading, swimming), PBIS frameworks emphasize teaching appropriate behaviors and setting forth clear behavior guidelines and expectations. PBIS is based on behaviorist theory and social learning models (Bradshaw et al., 2010). PBIS includes components such as having (a) universally adopted, consistently applied, well-defined expectations of behavior, (b) staff and students who are informed/trained on these expectations, (c) a reward system for students’ appropriate behaviors, and (d) additional intensive supports to address student needs in addition to systematic universal, school-wide procedures (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005). Schools implementing PBIS have experienced reductions in office disciplinary referrals and suspension rates, compared to schools not implementing PBIS (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Curtis, Van Horne, Robertson, & Karvonen, 2010; Luiselli et al., 2005; Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, 2008).

Though not as widespread in the literature as distinct PBIS efforts, there are emerging research examples that address problem behaviors in school-wide, universal approaches emphasizing proactive learning opportunities, with methods similar to PBIS models. Cantrell, Parks-Savage, and Rehfuss (2007) examined the effects of implementing a school-wide peer mediation program in a diverse, suburban elementary school of 825 students. The mediation program was based on social learning theory, capitalizing on the idea that students will imitate and learn from peer responses in social situations. During the 3-year longitudinal study, a decrease in infractions related to both physical and verbal conflict was evident, which coincided with a significant decrease in out-of-school suspensions. Suspensions were significantly lower during the 3 years of the study (2.1%–2.9% of the student population) compared to the 1 year preceding implementation (9.6% of the student population). Student mediators showed improvements in knowledge related to conflict resolution and problem solving, as demonstrated by a pretest and posttest assessment. A similar study conducted in a low socioeconomic, rural elementary with students in Grades 6–8 (Bell, Coleman, Anderson, Whelan, & Wilder, 2000) found that following the implementation of a peer mediation program, school-wide suspensions decreased compared to three previous years of baseline data, and the student mediators demonstrated reduced office referrals compared to a control group.
 Alternatives to Suspensions

THE CURRENT STUDY

Although there is research and theory that points to the potential success of a discipline system that focuses on prevention and skill building instead of punitive consequences, there is limited research on actual ATS interventions and their effectiveness. This study first created an ATS program, based on the rationale of learning theories and research illustrating the need to teach appropriate behaviors to students. Then, the program was piloted at an elementary school with students from families experiencing low socioeconomic circumstances. When students engaged in an act of misbehavior that would previously warrant a suspension per the schools’ discipline policies, specific strategies and interventions were implemented to replace the suspension. It was hypothesized that providing offending students with interventions that fulfilled skill deficits or responded to emotional needs of the student would result in less future problem behaviors compared to if the student had been suspended. The ATS program process and design was derived from the review of the literature and is presented next.

METHOD

Participants

The ATS program was piloted in an elementary school during the 2010/11 school year. There were a total of 553 students in preschool through Grade 6. The student population included 94% Latino/a, 3% Anglo, and 1% African American youths. Most of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (92%) and over three quarters were identified as English Language Learners (79%). Standardized test data from the 2009/10 year for the California Standards Tests (Educational Testing Services, 2010) showed that 31% of students had scores in the proficient or advanced levels on the English-Language Arts portion (compared to 52% in the district and 52% in the state), and 43% of students had scores in the proficient or advanced levels on Mathematics portion (compared to 58% in the district and 48% in the state). The school was in its fifth year in program improvement under the Federal Intervention Program at the time of the study.

A total of nine students were administered ATS interventions. Of these students, 22% were in fourth grade (n = 2), 22% were in fifth grade (n = 2), and 56% were in sixth grade (n = 5). All students (n = 9) were Latino/a, in general education, and were identified as English Language Learners.
Procedure

PBIS PROGRAM

An ATS approach was implemented as part of a school-wide PBIS initiative by a team including the school psychologist, school psychology graduate students, and university faculty. The administration at the elementary school expressed interest in reducing suspensions at the beginning of the school year. The 2010/11 school year was the first year of PBIS implementation. The PBIS program consisted of assessment and intervention at school-wide, class-wide, small-group, and individualized levels. School-wide behavioral expectations were taught to all students and staff at the beginning of the school year. All students received class-wide weekly lessons from a social-emotional curriculum taught by school psychology graduate students, which covered topics such as anger management, emotional regulation, problem solving, and strategies to deal with and prevent bullying. All students were screened for risk of behavioral and emotional problems using the Behavioral and Emotional Screening System (Kamphaus & Reynolds, 2007), using the teacher-report form for all grades and the student self-report form for Grades 3–6. The assessment results and teacher referrals informed small group and individual interventions, implemented by the PBIS team, as needed. The ATS program consisted solely of individualized interventions for students referred following a significant behavioral infraction. Parental consent was obtained prior to participation in the program.

STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS TO REPLACE SUSPENSIONS

The PBIS team designed the ATS program based on reviewed literature and research on suspension practices. Table 1 lists ATS strategies and interventions the PBIS team selected, which are based on skill-building and proactive learning, designed to address the behavioral needs of the student. These skill-building interventions also responded to the research, which found that students with behavioral problems often have (a) poor experiences with school, (b) families with little supervision and various stressors at home (Advocates for Children and Youth, 2006; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Bruns et al., 2005), and/or (c) parents who also had poor experiences with school (Achilles et al., 2007). Table 1 is compiled with interventions that addressed the ability or skill deficit, in addition to other empirically based methods that have been effective in changing behavior (e.g., cognitive-behavioral support, solution-focused counseling, direct instruction, and progress monitoring).
### TABLE 1 Alternatives to Suspensions: Strategies and Interventions

<table>
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<th>Alternative to suspension</th>
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| **Self-management plans**                       | ♦ Individualized self-management plans can help reduce undesired behavior (Peterson, 2005; K. Walker, 2009).  
♦ Behavior monitoring strategies such as daily report cards, self-charting of behaviors, and other strategies that provide feedback to the student can be utilized (Advocates for Children and Youth, 2006; Franklin, Peterson, Skiba, & Skiba, 2007). |
| **Debriefing and reflection assignments**       | ♦ Disruptive students can be sent to a quiet place in the classroom or outside of the classroom to fill out a “Cool Down Worksheet” or debriefing worksheet, where the student describes the infraction, why they did it, and what they need to do differently. The teacher then reviews this with the student during the next unstructured period (e.g., recess; Positive Environment, Network of Trainers; PENT, 2009). Relevant resources can be found at the PENT Web site at [http://www.pent.ca.gov/dsk/bspmanual.html](http://www.pent.ca.gov/dsk/bspmanual.html) |
| **Debriefing and reflection assignments**       | ♦ Students can be assigned homework that involves researching a topic relevant to their behavioral infraction (e.g., if the student was physically aggressive, they can research “social and legal consequences for aggression”). Students can then present a poster, PowerPoint presentation, or video presentation to their class in which they teach others the skill they learned (PENT, 2009). |
| **Behavior contracts**                          | ♦ Have students be actively involved in creating a contract delineating goals and positive and negative consequences. When students are engaged in the problem-solving process, they are being taught proactive behaviors (Franklin et al., 2007; Peterson, 2005).  
♦ If contracts are broken, a parent conference can be called to review the contract. The home and school can collaborate in developing consequences (Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2005). |
| **Natural consequences**                        | ♦ Disciplinary consequences should be related to the student’s inappropriate behavior. They should be designed to teach the student to have increased awareness or knowledge about why their behavior was unacceptable, therefore facilitating behavior change (Peterson, 2005; K. Walker, 2009; e.g., destruction of property or a food fight may result in a consequence that involves the student cleaning the cafeteria, walls, sweeping up rooms; accessing inappropriate Web sites on school computers may result in lost computer privileges).  
♦ Natural consequences involving the student replacing or repairing what they have damaged allow the student to feel empowered to restore or modify the school environment (Franklin et al., 2007). |

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<th>Alternative to suspension</th>
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| **Individualized social-emotional training/learning** | • Skill building related to student problem can be done through individual or group counseling, or class-wide lessons (Peterson, 2005; K. Walker, 2009).  
• Peer mediation programs developed to help offending students learn how to be effective problem-solvers and are then assigned to help other students solve problems during unstructured time (Advocates for Children and Youth, 2006; K. Walker, 2009). |
| **Counseling**                                | • General counseling can be used to understand the problem behavior and collaboratively problem solve to reduce future problem behaviors (Skiba & Rausch, 2006; K. Walker, 2009)  
• Counseling can identify personal issues interfering with student progress (Peterson, 2005).  
• Counseling can help the student see how their behavior interfered with others’ learning (e.g., empathy training) (Garibaldi, 1979). |
| **Parent involvement**                        | • Parents can be required to come to school with the student to help monitor their behavior and hold the student accountable (Peterson, 2005; K. Walker, 2009).  
• Parent training or parent counseling referrals can provide parents with needed skills to improve their child’s behavior as an added component to the direct student intervention (e.g., H. M. Walker et al., 2009).  
• Parent–teacher conferences can be required when students misbehave. The teacher/administrator, parents, and student can collaborate on a plan for the student to improve behavior (Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2003). |
| **Intervention rooms/in-school suspension**   | • Intervention rooms are more proactive alternatives to time-outs, time-away, or suspensions, because they involve psychoeducation and addressing the problem behavior (Garibaldi, 1979; Skiba & Rausch, 2006).  
• Before making an office referral or sending the student away from the room, teachers send students to an intervention room. The intervention room teachers help the student process the incident, attempt to help the student take responsibility for his or her behavior, and assist the student in returning to the classroom with developing a plan to avoid future problems. Research at the high school level showed this method to be effective (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).  
• Intervention rooms are staffed with teachers and daily assignments are provided. Assignments can focus on decision making, developing values, and processing behavior misdemeanors (Garibaldi, 1979). |
**Decision-making guide: Choosing appropriate alternatives to suspensions**

To move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to discipline, it was important to delineate, within the ATS program, which interventions should be chosen for different functions of behavior. Figure 1 summarizes the main findings presented in this literature review in the format of a practical guide to decision-making for interventions to be used within an ATS program model. When a student committed an offense, a debriefing and reflection assignment was implemented in order for both the student and the school staff to be aware of the student’s behavioral function. Additionally, further assessment, including interviews and observations, was conducted to evaluate the function of the student offense. This assessment process, designed to align with behaviorist theory, aimed to evaluate what was reinforcing the student behavior so as to inform subsequent interventions. The intervention needed to account for the function of the students’ problem behavior (McIntosh, Campbell, Carter, & Dickey, 2009), as well as components of a student’s background and systems, as described by the social-ecological theory (e.g., home, parents, and friends).

Figure 1 refers to types of interventions described in Table 1, which are divided into three categories based on various functions of the problem behavior: interventions appropriate for defiance/bad choices, skill/ability deficit, or social/emotional need. While it is likely that certain student offenses are committed in situations where students know what is right, but choose to do what is wrong (defiance/bad choices), there are also situations where students may not know how to appropriately act (skill/ability deficit) or where student behavior is being influenced by home and life stressors (social/emotional need; Advocates for Children and Youth, 2006; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Bruns et al., 2005). Interventions were selected to match various functions of behavior, with considerations from learning theories and relevant research. For instance, recommending social-emotional training for students with skill/ability deficits can help students learn how to achieve desired reinforcements through appropriate behaviors. Additionally, parent involvement is suggested as an important component for each function of behavior as social-ecological theory would support parent behavior as significantly impacting child behavior (Wheeler & Richey, 2005). Furthermore, suggesting parent involvement through parent trainings or sharing the students’ social-emotional curriculums with parents may achieve the goal of getting parent attention in a proactive, constructive way (Dupper et al., 2009).

This decision-making guide informed the third-tier, individualized student intervention, within a school that had various school-wide, class-wide, and small-group supports in place. As the PBIS literature supports, it is important and more efficient to primarily utilize and implement broader
FIGURE 1 Decision-making guide: choosing appropriate alternatives to suspensions.
interventions, and then progress to individualized interventions if the broader interventions are ineffective (Sugai & Horner, 2009). For instance, if a particular grade level of students is committing a similar offense (e.g., bullying), a grade-wide intervention would first be appropriate. Similarly, if five or six students engage in an act of stealing, a small-group intervention would first be appropriate. The decision-making guide in Figure 1 can also be utilized to assess for commonalities among offenses to inform whether interventions can be conducted broadly or individually, in an effort to maximize efficiency.

RESULTS

When comparing suspension data from the 5 years previous to the ATS program implementation, 2005/06 \( (N = 57) \), 2006/07 \( (N = 49) \), 2007/08 \( (N = 45) \), 2008/09 \( (N = 42) \), and 2009/10 \( (N = 42) \) to the suspension data from the 2010/11 school year \( (N = 23) \), there were fewer suspensions during the year the ATS model was implemented. Of the nine students receiving specific activities from the ATS program, two of these students (22%) each had one reoffense of suspension, and seven (78%) did not. Among the 36 students suspended the previous year (2009/10), 18 students (46%) had at least one subsequent reoffense resulting in additional suspensions. While there is an insufficient amount of data to statistically compare the number of suspensions and number of reoffenses in years preceding the ATS program with numbers from the year of the ATS program, these numbers do provide some support for the success of the ATS program in reducing suspensions and reoffenses.

The following case study provides an example of how the ATS model was applied, following the approach delineated in Table 1 and Figure 1. Although data are qualitative in nature, and with no control groups to examine the effectiveness of the intervention, this case study illustrates how to implement and make decisions within an ATS model. However, the quantitative data on number of suspensions and reoffenses of suspensions following the intervention, compared to the number of suspensions and reoffense of suspensions from the previous year when the ATS program was not in place, provide a preliminary indication of program success.

CASE STUDY: TEACHING SKILLS TO ADDRESS PHYSICAL AND VERBAL BULLYING

Amy was a 9-year-old student in fourth grade. She was an English Language Learner and part of the school district’s free/reduced-price lunch program. Throughout her fourth-grade year, she consistently scored in the below average and average range in language arts and mathematics, receiving more below average grades at the beginning of the school year and
more average grades towards the end of the school year. She had frequent absences \( (n = 17) \) and tardies \( (n = 47) \) throughout the 172-day school year. Her grades for development of personal and citizenship skills were below average in the first trimester and average in the second and third trimester. Amy did not have any previously documented suspensions in her school records. However, Amy admitted that she had a history of “getting in trouble” for behavioral problems in school for as long as she could remember. There were no documented social-emotional or behavioral interventions in her school cumulative file.

In the first trimester of fourth grade, Amy was brought to the administration’s attention due to her verbal and physical bullying of other students. She had verbally threatened two students during school hours and physically hit another student while participating in the school’s after-school program. Amy’s behaviors warranted school disciplinary action, as reported by the principal, and Amy was also in danger of being expelled from the after-school program. Following the steps in Figure 1, Amy and the PBIS team members completed various worksheets that facilitated an assessment of the function of Amy’s behavior; this took place during a 45-minute session on the school day following the principal’s report of Amy’s disciplinary infraction. The worksheets were titled, “Thinking about My Behavior,” “Understanding Feelings Can Affect My Behavior,” and “Problem Solving Steps,” and are available through the Positive Environment, Network of Trainers (2009) Web site (URL provided in Table 1). The worksheets provide questions that prompt students to think about their choices, reasons for their behavior, and better options for choosing future behaviors. From the debriefing/reflection assignment process, Amy and the PBIS team member concluded that Amy often got angry when she felt out of control, and in response to being angry, she became aggressive with peers. Additionally, the PBIS team member consulted with teachers and after-school program staff to understand the presenting problem and goals that her parents and school staff had for Amy. School staff members wanted Amy to reduce her physical and verbal aggression and increase her prosocial behaviors. Amy’s parents signed and returned a consent form that allowed Amy to be involved with services from the PBIS team. Unfortunately, after several attempts to contact Amy’s parents, the parents could not be reached for additional information.

Based on information derived from the debriefing and reflection assignment and student and teacher interviews, it was determined that Amy demonstrated a skill/ability deficit in controlling her anger, for which Amy had received no previous interventions. The goal of the alternative to suspension activity was to increase Amy’s knowledge and ability to calm down when angry, with the selected intervention of social-emotional training. After getting input from Amy’s teachers and Amy, the PBIS team decided that Amy would work on strategies to calm down in four weekly pull-out counseling sessions, culminating with a final project demonstrating what Amy learned.
In the counseling sessions, the PBIS team member taught and practiced self-calming strategies with Amy, directed by the Second Step curriculum (Committee for Children, 2002). The complete Second Step curriculum was simultaneously being taught class-wide, so the PBIS member selected two Second Step lessons relevant to Amy’s goals that had not yet been presented in Amy’s class, which Amy would subsequently help teach. The first two counseling sessions focused on Amy learning these two Second Step lessons, “Managing Strong Feelings” and “Calming Down Anger.” In the third and fourth counseling sessions, they reviewed the curriculum and rehearsed teaching the two lessons. Since Amy had an interest in art, the third and fourth counseling sessions were also used to make a “Ways to Calm Down” poster for Amy to present during one of the class lessons. Following the four weeks of intervention, Amy assisted the PBIS member in teaching two weekly lessons to Amy’s class.

Amy’s progress was monitored weekly during counseling sessions and she consistently verbally reported improvement in how she felt about school and the after-school program. Additionally, the PBIS team member met with Amy’s teacher biweekly following the start of the alternative to suspension activity until the activity was completed and then monthly thereafter. Amy’s teacher reported seeing progress in Amy’s behavior and noted satisfaction with the alternative to suspension activity, saying that it resulted in behavioral change. For the remainder of the school year (6 months), Amy did not have a reoffense. There was one report of Amy engaging in physical aggression in her after-school program, compared to weekly complaints about Amy’s behavior from the after-school program prior to the intervention. When this event occurred, the PBIS team member met with Amy for two booster/review counseling sessions. In these sessions, Amy was able to verbally recall the strategies she learned to calm down, demonstrate the strategies in role-play scenarios, and discuss how she will better apply the strategies in the future. The PBIS team member continued to check in with Amy and her teachers on a regular basis, and Amy demonstrated (based on student report and teacher observation) that she remembered and used strategies to calm down when she became angry. Additionally, Amy verbally reported to the PBIS team member that she herself felt more in control of her emotions, more confident in her calming-down skills, and more satisfied in her participation in the after school program, which she previously expressed dislike towards. The support processes implemented for Amy yielded the desired behaviors throughout the remainder of the school year.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this pilot study provide preliminary evidence that schools can find success in implementing an ATS program that promotes prosocial
behaviors by engaging students to facilitate their understanding and enhance their knowledge. This pilot study demonstrated a reduction in suspensions compared with previous years, within a small city elementary school, with predominantly Latino/a students and students with families experiencing low socioeconomic circumstances. Additionally, the case study demonstrated how a proactive, learning approach to behavioral problems could potentially effectively replace punitive school discipline practices that frequent the country.

Future studies should be conducted to further examine how an ATS model affects suspension reoffenses, improvements in behavioral and social-emotional functioning (e.g., based on diagnostic scales, student report, and teacher report), and other disciplinary actions. Additionally, studies should explore how an ATS model may function differently in schools with or without other PBIS programs in place. Individualized approaches, such as the ATS model, are likely to be more effective when they are included as one part of a comprehensive school-wide positive behavior approach (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Consideration of student access to both universal and group level supports is needed. Future research is needed to determine the optimal amount and timing of activities within an ATS program, as well as how to best integrate them within a comprehensive PBIS program.

Based on our experiences, we propose that the ATS model as presented can serve as a beginning base for future proactive practices in responding to student behavioral misdemeanors. Although such a proposed system change takes effort, time, and staff and administration buy-in, these guidelines encourage education professionals to use a discipline model that responds to the needs of the students and aims to implement evidence-based strategies to promote learning and reduce recidivism. Consistent with PBIS frameworks and learning theories, students should not be solely punished for misbehavior; they need to be taught behavior when there is a clear indication that there is a deficit in their skills.

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**COMPETING INTERESTS**

We do not have any conflicts of interest to disclose.

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