

**DisMISS Project
(Disproportionate Minority Involvement of Suspended Students)**

Lessons Learned Report

prepared by

**Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention –
Center for the Prevention of School Violence**

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Executive Summary

The North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - Center for the Prevention of School Violence (DJJDP – Center) conducted a project in North Carolina that focused on issues related to educational alternatives to disproportionate minority suspensions and expulsions in North Carolina’s public schools. Funded by the North Carolina Governor’s Crime Commission, the DisMISS (Disproportionate Minority Involvement of Suspended Students) Project focused on the reduction of students, specifically minority students, being suspended and expelled statewide, thus reducing the number of lost instructional days. The second goal involved the enhancement of the number and quality of alternatives to suspension and expulsion options that exist. The project was designed to improve and enhance the capacity of administrators to assess current practices, programs, and policies that could possibly perpetuate inconsistent usage of suspensions and expulsions. The participating school sites networked with one another to share promising strategies and barriers to implementation. From this, DJJDP-Center staff has compiled a list of valuable lessons learned on how to ensure success in such an effort. The lessons include:

LESSON ONE: Understand the school climate

Understanding the local school climate and environment is a critical first step.

LESSON TWO: Conduct a self-assessment

Conducting a self-assessment provides an in-depth analysis of the school dynamics.

LESSON THREE: Identify and educate key stakeholders in solving the problem

Involving key stakeholders provides important connections and valuable input to possible solutions.

LESSON FOUR: Know your staff

Understanding the capabilities of school staff can enhance strategy implementation.

LESSON FIVE: Ensure that students are involved

Involving students meaningfully can prove to be a valuable “asset” to addressing the problem.

LESSON SIX: Communicate effectively the purpose of school-wide efforts

Communicating the purpose of the suspension and expulsion initiative creates clarity towards strategy implementation.

LESSON SEVEN: Review and select promising strategies

Selecting appropriate strategies to implement is important to ensure favorable outcomes.

LESSON EIGHT: Assess strategy effectiveness

Assessing implemented strategies can ensure that the school is headed in the right direction.

LESSON NINE: Share strategy successes and failures

Sharing supporting factors and barriers to strategy implementation is critical.

LESSON TEN: Understand that early prevention works

Engaging in activities that focus on early prevention can ensure project success.

The provided lessons learned through the DisMISS Project provide an understanding of components necessary to successfully address the problem of suspensions and expulsions. The lessons are intended to provide school systems with guidance in their attempt to begin similar initiatives.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - Center for the Prevention of School Violence (DJJDP – Center) conducted a project in North Carolina that focused on issues related to educational alternatives to disproportionate minority suspensions and expulsions in North Carolina’s public schools. Funded by the North Carolina Governor’s Crime Commission, the DisMISS (Disproportionate Minority Involvement of Suspended Students) Project focused on the reduction of students, specifically minority students, being suspended and expelled statewide, thus reducing the number of lost instructional days. The second goal involved the enhancement of the number and quality of alternatives to suspension and expulsion options that exist. The project was also designed to improve and enhance the capacity of administrators to assess current practices, programs, and policies that could possibly perpetuate inconsistent usage of suspensions and expulsions. The participating school sites networked with one another to share promising strategies and barriers to implementation. The DJJDP-Center staff provided flexible technical assistance to schools in their attempts to establish safer learning environments.

Many lessons that can be beneficial to school systems across the state and various youth-serving professionals were learned over the course of the two-year project. These lessons can assist other schools undertaking similar initiatives to gain a better understanding and perspective of the successes and challenges to be faced in such efforts. The lessons learned from the DisMISS Project are highlighted in this document. Before reviewing them, background information about the project is provided.

Background

Since 1997, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has substantiated the existence of disproportionate minority contact in suspension and expulsion practices throughout North Carolina’s schools. Upon the DisMISS Project initiation in 2003, DPI indicated that approximately one out of every nine public school students in North Carolina was suspended from school at least once. In addition, 287,810 suspensions were handed out totaling *over* 1,000,000 instructional days, which represents a significant loss of opportunity for both students and teachers in their quest to meet high standards. Since 2001, there has been a steady increase in the number of suspensions and expulsions. Black and multi-racial students account for the highest percentage of

suspended students since 1998. There was an increase in the number of short-term suspensions given across all ethnic groups in 2002-03. Black and multi-racial males accounted for 41% of short-term suspensions in 2002-03 yet represented only 16% of the total student population.

The Department of Public Instruction also concluded that the performance of suspended students on yearly testing declined as the total numbers of days spent out of school due to suspension increased. Nearly 40% of African-American students fell to a lower achievement level as opposed to approximately 20% of white students falling to a lower level. Although legislation now requires that every school district provide at least one alternative learning program, a lack of enough appropriate quality programming has been verified by DJJDP-Center and DPI.

Departmental efforts to specifically address suspension and expulsion rates started in 2001 with a grant entitled Project EASE (Educational Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion). DJJDP – Center had been awarded a federal challenge grant by the Governor’s Crime Commission (GCC) to research educational alternatives for disproportionate minority suspensions and expulsions in North Carolina’s public schools. Project EASE was intended to reduce disproportionate minority suspension and expulsion rates in participating schools through the identification and dissemination of promising strategies and best practices. Increasing the number of educational alternatives used as a replacement for suspensions and expulsions was also an objective of the project.

Project EASE was divided into two phases. Phase One included the selection of five “guiding” schools successful in reducing their minority suspension and expulsion rates. Once these schools were identified, Project EASE staff collected data and conducted interviews, site visits, and meetings to determine effective program strategies. Assessments of Phase One schools allowed for a report to be developed that outlined successful strategies and best practices. During Phase Two of the project, strategies highlighted in the Phase One report were used by “implementing” schools to enhance practices and programs that would address reducing suspension and expulsion.

Upon the completion of Project EASE, DJJDP-Center staff received another federally funded “challenge” grant from GCC in October 2003. This grant, the DisMISS Project, was deemed as the continuation of efforts initiated by Project EASE and provided intensive technical assistance to

fifteen participating school sites in the implementation of promising strategies. DJJDP-Center staff identified fifteen schools, ten in Year One and five in Year Two, for project participation (See **Figure 1**). School sites were selected based on 2002-2003 local school system suspension and expulsion rates, current minority population, geographic location, size, other demographic information, and individual school's interest in participating. Schools were given an opportunity to volunteer for project participation during conferences and workshops. Other dynamics that played a role in the selection process were other school demographics, size, and geographic location. Participating schools reviewed all promising strategies with DJJDP - Center DisMISS Project staff. Promising strategies to be implemented at the schools were decided based upon the needs and desires of each of the schools. The promising strategies implemented at the schools varied depending on the needs of the schools. Stipends were granted to each school participating in the DisMISS Project to address the issue of disproportionate minority suspensions and expulsions and assist in the implementation of selected strategies. By project's end, DJJDP-Center had successfully identified and provided assistance to fourteen school sites. Each school site is at varying stages of addressing the issue. DJJDP-Center has pledged to continue to work with each site far after the grant's end date.

Figure 1: DisMISS Project School Sites



Patterns regarding the reduction of disproportionate minority suspensions and expulsions have been identified as “promising strategies” through previous work conducted by DJJDP – Center. Strategies included the following: parental involvement; alternative placement; school climate; leadership; staff development; and community involvement. These promising strategies were given in conjunction with intensive technical assistance to identified schools in order to implement relevant strategies aimed at reducing suspensions and expulsions. Included in this intensive assistance was small consultant stipends awarded to each school for project participation, site visits, materials, staff developments, and evaluation assistance.

Lessons Learned

Upon completion of the DisMISS Project, valuable lessons were learned on how to achieve success with such an effort. The lessons that were learned from the project focused on dynamics to build the capacity of schools to reduce suspension and expulsions. The reporting out of these lessons is meant to assist other schools and school systems that may be interested in undertaking a similar initiative.

LESSON ONE: Understand the School Climate

According to research, to achieve a receptive school climate there must exist collaboration, high expectations, mutual trust, caring, and support for all individuals. Having a school climate that has the capacity to make positive change impacts the overall effectiveness of a school. Research also indicates that students in a school with a positive school climate are more likely to attend regularly, cooperate fully, contribute more frequently, and achieve better than students from a school with a less desirable school climate. Creating such a climate starts with the administrator identifying opportunities to positively change practices, programs, and policies to ensure success for all youth. Participating school sites of the DisMISS Project had to continually look for opportunities to create positive learning environments. These environments allowed for students to enhance their self-esteem and develop respect for themselves and others. School sites also valued the input of students, teachers, and parents and recognized their involvement as critical to ensure a positive climate.

Understanding the “local” school climate proved to be a challenging task for many administrators. As alluded to, it is critical to involve parents and students to determine the school-community strengths and weaknesses in providing a positive climate. Providing a basic assessment or

questionnaire for parents and youth can yield positive results as administrators seek to better understand the school climate. Another challenge indicated by some project sites were from first-

Ten Questions Every School Should Answer

In understanding the school climate, gaining the perspective of students and staff is critical. Here are ten initial questions that can start the process of determining the nature of the school climate.

1. Do students / teachers feel safe at school?
2. Do students feel connected to the school?
3. Do students / teachers feel that they are treated with respect?
4. Do students feel that teachers care about their success?
5. Do students have opportunities to be meaningfully involved in the school community?
6. Do teachers expect the best from all students?
7. Do students feel engaged in the learning process?
8. Are parents given an opportunity to be involved in the school?
9. Are teachers given an opportunity to integrate innovative teaching strategies?
10. Is the community a viable part of school activities?

year administrators. Administrators indicated that they initially did not understand the capacity of the school to effectively address suspensions and expulsions. Although every administrator wants to create positive learning environments, those administrators with a greater understanding of their school dynamics, and reliant on staff knowledge will invariably see success.

Another important aspect to note is in regards to understanding the “climate” of the state in addressing suspensions and expulsions. For the past five years the Governor’s Office, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Attorney General’s Office, and the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have in some capacity

increased the awareness for schools, communities, and parents to look at the problem of increased suspensions and expulsions. Each state agency provided a backdrop for local schools and communities to begin efforts. Understanding the favorable climate at the state level for change impacted the reaction at the local level, specifically the Superintendent’s Office. DJJDP-Center staff initiated contact with the Superintendent’s Office prior to contacting the school site. This was to thoroughly explain the project goals and objectives and also to communicate the importance of their

support to the potential project sites. Knowing the climate at central office was a critical component of their endorsing the project and providing resources needed to be successful.

LESSON TWO: Conduct a Self-Assessment

By definition, a self-assessment can be described as the process of examining or carefully judging one's abilities and/or limitations. As it relates to participating schools, the process of conducting a self-assessment was critical. Upon agreement to participate in the DisMISS Project, DJJDP-Center staff assisted schools in a process to determine barriers and supporting factors to address increasing suspension and expulsion rates. This in-depth look is important as it provides specific information on what is currently in place and what strategies can be enhanced to reduce suspensions and expulsions. The self-assessment process begins with analyzing suspension and expulsion data (See **Attachment A**). Oftentimes collected data is not used to help understand the dynamics of the problem. Suspension and expulsion data was used to not only understand who was being suspended, but also to provide a snapshot into the reasons for the suspension.

A tool introduced by DJJDP-Center staff to assist in conducting a self-assessment was the S.A.R.A. (scanning; analyzing; responding; and assessing) problem-solving approach. S.A.R.A. is a systematic process for understanding the dynamics of a “priority problem” and developing effective strategies. Participating schools that undertook this process indicated that they were able to identify in great detail the scope of the problem. One particular school spoke of the “priority problem” being fights in the hallways and bathrooms. After conducting a pre-test to determine the problem specifics, students and teacher both indicated that there was no “surveillance” or “monitoring” in a specific wing of a school where most fights occurred. After this discovery, administration responded by assigning student hall monitors and placed a teacher on duty in the area. This significantly impacted the number of office referrals for fights.

S.A.R.A. Process: Applying the Problem-Solving Approach

Schools attempting to solve problems associated with suspensions and expulsions can use a systematic approach entitled S.A.R.A. (Scanning, Analyzing, Responding, and Assessing). This problem-solving model stands for scanning, analyzing, responding, and assessing. S.A.R.A. offers a process that can be applied as schools put forth effort to improve the school climate and address suspensions and expulsions.

Scanning involves identifying a “priority problem” and verifying its existence. In this phase, potential problems are identified by the school community and other related stakeholders, such as law enforcement. The entire school community discusses problems that exist and a “priority problem” may be identified. A survey of students and staff is conducted to verify the problem’s existence. Survey results become the focus of the next step in S.A.R.A.

Analyzing involves examining information and data gathered about the “priority problem” and determining the reasons why the problem exists. The results from the surveying of students and staff are crucial in determining the response and actions taken.

Responding involves taking the information from the analysis phase and formulating a response or solution to the “priority problem.” Brainstorming on alternative and various strategies should be pursued in this phase. The entire school community needs to become involved in taking responsibility for the solving of the “priority problem.”

Assessing involves determining if the solution implemented helped solve the problem. The impact and effectiveness of the solution can be determined by a post-survey of students and staff.

Conducting a self-assessment at each school site starts with the administration, but also includes the entire school community. Teachers, students, and other staff are valuable contributors in understanding the dynamics of the challenge. Surveys, interviews, and observations were all used in the process. School sites were encouraged to continue to seek out input from the school community. A few sought input from parents to get their perspective on the challenges and possible solutions.

This process should not solely focus on identifying problem dynamics, but also on the opportunities to develop or enhance practices, programs, or policies aimed at reducing suspensions and expulsions. Prior to their involvement in the DisMISS Project, school sites were already engaged in activities that sought to improve the school climate. Most sites needed assistance in highlighting strategies that were effective. The DisMISS Project provided schools with information on the collected “promising strategies” and various manners of implementation. The lesson to be learned here is the

need to properly identify the dynamics of a problem in order to develop effective solutions and make self-assessment an ongoing process.

LESSON THREE: Identify and Educate Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholders from the school and community are important to empower in any attempt to impact change. These stakeholders are critical to the success of the project and one of the first steps involves acknowledging the key individuals or agencies that could assist in activities associated with suspension and expulsion reduction. The identification stage may take some effort from administrators and calls for leadership by example. Involving others means that the administration

Building Community Consensus

Engaging the community and key stakeholders can be accomplished in various manners. A participating school decided to involve the community by working with the local law enforcement, health and human services, and juvenile justice professionals to facilitate town hall meetings to discuss the “state of the child” within the county.

The first step taken by the school administrators was to communicate to the each participating agency that they were dealing with “the same youth.” Although each agency understood this to be true, they were not operating as a seamless entity.

Next, each agency was asked to promote and advertise the town hall meetings from their various capacities. The school decided to develop a newsletter for parents and other community members to discuss school topics and these upcoming forums. Administrators indicated that the newsletters were successful in sharing information and have decided to continue using this as a mechanism for effective communication.

Each agency assisted in the various components of planning for this event and had an opportunity to share information at the meeting from their perspective. The town hall meeting had good attendance, but the agencies would like to increase these numbers. This event was deemed successful because the community had an opportunity to share their opinions and local officials were able to answer questions to bring everyone up to speed. This strategy, if well planned, can be a useful tool to build community connections for the success of youth.

must fully support the school’s endeavor and communicate effectively the project’s goal to gain “buy-in” and support.

The biggest challenge for most DisMISS school sites was the involvement of stakeholders within the community. Entities such as the faith and business communities were sought out but proved to be difficult because of their lack of understanding of “how” to be involved. The lesson that was learned

from this point became how to operationalize “their” involvement. The education of community stakeholders became the priority for most schools as they attempted to make them aware of suspension / expulsion reduction efforts. Opportunities to educate key stakeholders included the following: town hall meetings; parent / teacher focus groups; PTA meetings; school newsletters; and notifying local media regarding school initiatives. Participating schools took every opportunity to communicate their specific initiatives and ways to become involved. This communication operationalized the community’s involvement by clearly explaining their role and responsibility.

To ensure the sustainability of the schools efforts for including key stakeholders, DJJDP-Center staff assisted sites in building the capacity to facilitate community workgroups that would continually look for opportunities to reduce suspensions and expulsions. Such a workgroup should include a cross-section of school and community stakeholders to be effective. Many school sites indicated their current involvement in established, local workgroups. This gave sites an opportunity to infuse suspension and expulsion goals into an existing infrastructure.

Other challenges that presented themselves included change in personnel from various agencies and organizations. This turnover made it difficult to maintain consistent relationships. This made the education process ongoing. Administrators who understood that the climate could change in a moment asked for stakeholders to sign a “memorandum of understanding” which spelled out their participation. This was extremely useful in explaining the entities’ commitment to that specific school. Innovative opportunities to identify, educate, and engage stakeholders were key to the DisMISS Project success.

LESSON FOUR: Know Your Staff

The basis of this lesson learned involves knowing the staff that will be involved in the project daily. As it relates to the DisMISS Project, all staff should be involved in the day-to-day activities in suspension and expulsion reduction. The emphasis of “knowing” your people is focused more on administration knowing staff individual strengths and weaknesses in achieving the end goal. In understanding staff strengths and weaknesses, it is critical to focus on opportunities to develop “your” people (staff) professionally to work effectively in the school environment. Important dynamics to consider include the teacher background and experience.

Utilizing Staff Developments

“I am tired of breaking up fights,” responded an administrator from a participating DisMISS Project school site. This comment is all too familiar and comes from the unfortunate common occurrence of conflict in schools.

What’s more frightening is that conflict in today’s schools can be detrimental to existing opportunities for teachers to teach and students to learn in a caring and safe environment.

To become better prepared to handle conflict, DisMISS Project staff provided participating schools a staff development on the *Reach to Teach* process for managing conflict. The *Reach to Teach* process includes the following:

Reach In: Encouraging the evaluation of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and realizing how they impact conflict management style.

Reach Out: Understanding the importance of active and reflective listening, building trust and maintaining a good rapport with students.

Reach Over: Providing teachers with the tools to effectively manage conflict.

Other staff developments provided to schools by DisMISS Project staff included: gang awareness; bullying prevention; understanding the youth culture; innovative teaching techniques; and cultural competency.

The challenge that the administration initially is presented with is to ensure that all staff is supportive of the school’s goals to reduce suspensions and expulsions. Some staff may not “fit” into the greater plan to positively impact the school climate. The first mechanism to assist in “bringing staff up to speed” is through providing staff development trainings aimed at modifying teacher reactions to potential situations that could lead to a suspension or expulsion. The most noteworthy staff development provided by DJJDP-Center staff was on conflict management. This staff development focused on how the individual must understand the dynamics of conflict and opportunities to assess oneself, communicate effectively, and manage conflict in the classroom. Staff developments such as this provide staff with “tools” necessary to assist in their day-to-day interactions with youth.

Regardless of the teacher’s background, it is important to promote the school as a learning organization, one that is perpetually trying to improve on the way business is being accomplished.

Another opportunity for administration is to “know” the experience of their staff. The experience pertains to the number of years that teachers have in the classroom. Oftentimes the experience of the teacher translates to their potential success or failure in the classroom. To overcome the challenges that new teachers may face in the classroom, many administrators have turned to innovative

practices such as teacher mentors. Partnering an experienced teacher with a new teacher can yield positive results. The advantages are numerous, but administrators must be wary of the new “school culture” not being communicated effectively. Experienced educators have a vast amount of knowledge, but may change the least because of their tenure. Gaining their support as they work with teachers to provide effective conflict management skills, rapport building mechanisms, and strategies to keep youth committed to getting an education is critical. The lesson learned here is the importance of knowing the background and experience of staff in carrying out the goals of the suspension and expulsion reduction initiative.

LESSON FIVE: Ensure that Students are Involved

Engaging students to be involved is ideal. Understanding the dynamics of a school climate can best be described from the student’s perspective.

Students are oftentimes the most underutilized resource in the school. This fact alone may be a determining factor in the success of a project. The knowledge base of the “customer” to the inner-workings of a school can prove to be useful in the strategy development and implementation. Involving students not only in the process but in a meaningful manner can create stronger connections to the school environment.

Schools are continually perplexed with the challenges associated with the involvement of students. The initial and probably most important piece of this lesson is to involve “all” students. Administrators and teachers sometimes get into the habit of utilizing students who are high achievers or already actively involved. The challenge then becomes how to enlist the support of students who in many cases are the ones who may have been suspended in the past. Schools sites that thought creatively to engage students yielded positive results. Initial ways to involve students came in the form of “study circles,” which sought to gain a greater understanding of how youth perceived the school. Study circles gave students an opportunity

Implementing Study Circles

Study circles are small discussion groups of students that are used to gain insight into issues or problems in schools.

A participating school decided to implement study circles as a way to engage students. For an entire day, teachers facilitated small group sessions of approximately 25 students. The “priority problem” that was discussed was harassment and bullying.

Students had an opportunity to share their thoughts concerning the problem and more importantly their passion to be a part of the solution. Study circles empowered participating youth and proved to be effective for students being utilized as change agents in the school.

to speak with their peers in a small group setting. Staff facilitators were urged to observe and allow for students to speak their mind.

Innovative ideas were abundant, but there were many logistical challenges present. To engage students, schools must take into consideration the “what, when, who, why, and how’s” to getting started. The question of “what” pertains to the purpose of involving students. Of course there are many benefits to having students involved, but is there a specific goal and if so, it should be communicated. “When” pertains to the time of involvement. To involve students during the school day may interrupt the learning process, but the school may have transportation issues if they attempt to do any afterschool activities. The “who” focuses solely on the individual staff tasked with coordinating student activities. This individual should be passionate about the initiative, so as to be able to communicate to youth its importance. “Why” is self-explanatory, but critical in how the purpose of involvement is communicated to students. Having students involved meaningfully is just as important as the overall goal of the initiative. Lastly, “how” speaks to the modes of involvement. Similar to study circles, students can be involved in various capacities. The lesson that is learned hinges on the need to involve students, but also the school’s capacity to sustain activities to keep them involved.

LESSON SIX: Communicate Effectively the Purpose of School-Wide Efforts

Communicating effectively the efforts of the school is critical in ensuring success. Suspension and expulsion reduction is a complicated issue that requires administrators to relay information to staff, students, and stakeholders in an understandable manner. If goals and objectives are not communicated effectively, then responding to the problem could prove ineffective. Valuable time and resources can be lost if the purpose is not clear from the beginning. DJJDP-Center staff emphasized the importance of creating a documented plan of action that included specific school-wide goals, objectives, and potential deliverables. Most school sites incorporated a conceptual plan, but a physical document that takes into account all of the aforementioned would be preferable. Having an actual plan of action makes it easier to present what the school intends to accomplish to key stakeholders. Also, with potential turnover, having a physical document that describes the dynamics of the initiative will ensure that ground is not lost.

Another challenge in communicating the purpose is related to the importance of understanding the “root cause” of suspensions and expulsions.

Partners should understand that the purpose of the suspension/expulsion initiative is to respond to the “root causes.” Root causes are early warning signs to potential behavior that could lead to suspension or expulsion. Root causes can range from low commitment to education by the student to ineffective means to deal with conflict learned through family interactions. Although the root cause will vary depending on the staff and student population, schools need to identify problems specific to their locality. Successful strategy implementation relies strongly on this process.

Key Elements of Action-Planning

Creating an action plan for the reduction of suspensions and expulsions can yield positive results in key stakeholders understanding their roles and responsibilities. Here are the components necessary for creating an effective plan of action.

- Vision and Mission Statements
- Value Statements
- Goals / Objectives
- Critical Success Factors
- Environmental Scans
 - External Scans: Threats and Opportunities
 - Internal Scans: Strengths and Challenges
- Critical Issues / Problem Statement
- Strategy Development
- Evaluating Impact

LESSON SEVEN: Review and Select Promising Strategies

Upon DisMISS Project initiation at each participating school, DJJDP-Center staff presented a listing of “promising strategies” that were utilized by schools that participated in Project EASE (See **Attachment B**). Selecting the most appropriate strategy is extremely important, and each school site should take careful consideration in implementation. An important step in the review and selection process is to recognize the supporting factors and barriers to implementation from other experienced schools. At the beginning of this process, DJJDP-Center staff presented examples of how various schools across the state utilized each of the recommended “promising strategies.” Administrators and other student support staff that were part of the review and selection process had to take into account the feasibility of implementing specific strategies. Discussion regarding strategy selection were framed under what is called the “3 M’s” (materials, manpower, and machinery). “Materials” focuses on the resources available or needed to implement a specific strategy. School sites that decided to implement a strategy that focused on positive reinforcement needed to ensure that the school had the capacity to purchase or locate potential rewards for students.

DisMISS Project “Promising Strategies”

“Promising strategies” implemented by DisMISS Project school sites originated from a previous project entitled Project EASE (Educational Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion). Project EASE sought to expand upon existing knowledge by identifying schools evidencing success in reference to reducing suspensions and expulsions and offering assistance to those schools in need of cultivating educational alternatives to suspension and expulsion. At the completion of the project, “promising strategies” had been identified and became the basis of the DisMISS Project.

Leadership

Leadership is critical in the implementation of “promising strategies.” Administrators from participating schools not only saw the need to reduce their suspension and expulsion rates but also took action to address the need(s) of their school. Many of the school sites empowered assistant principals and student support staff in the initiative. Administrators served as role models and were visible in school activities.

Parental Involvement

Many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have documented the importance of parent involvement as a critical component to a school’s success. When parents participate in their children's education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitudes. School sites increased parental involvement through the utilization of Saturday School, home visits, recognition and reward programs, and parent newsletters.

Alternative Placement

Alternative placement is used to address two behavioral issues. First, when a student is disrupting class or acting out in a manner that does not warrant suspension, alternative placement is used to offer both teachers and students a reprieve. The second reason for alternative placement is when a student has performed a suspendible action that requires short-term removal from the school environment. Alternative placement programs that remove students from the general student body and allow students to continue their education while addressing the behavior that caused the suspension is critical to ensure student success. Schools utilized a Saturday Academy program, Behavior Intervention Center, and in-school suspension (Chill Out and Genesis programs).

School Climate

By focusing on positive recognition of student actions and celebrating the differences of students, the schools attempt to create environments in which positive behavior is celebrated. Improving the school climate at the sites was accomplished through the use of In-School Positive Recognition Programs, Glad Calls, Student Planners, and student artwork.

Staff Development

Staff development enables schools to keep up with the changes in legislation, school system guidelines, and overall education trends. All schools must continue to provide staff with new training that will aid in the overall success of youth. Various staff developments that participating sites engaged in include conflict management, bullying prevention, understanding youth culture, and understanding the impact of poverty.

Community Involvement

The involvement of the community and key stakeholders can yield positive results in the reduction of suspensions and expulsions. Community leaders were involved with participating sites in various manners. Town hall meetings, career exploration programs, job shadowing / apprenticeship programs, and alternatives to suspension sites were all various ways the schools were engaged with the community.

“Manpower” accounts for the people needed to accomplish a task. Although the easiest to define, many schools faced the challenge of having “over-worked” staff and not having an individual that could indeed coordinate strategy facilitation. The last “M” is for “method,” which is the “nuts and bolts” of strategy implementation. Method speaks to the specifics of how the strategy will operate. Implementing the most appropriate strategy for the individual school is the most important lesson that is learned.

LESSON EIGHT: Assess Strategy Effectiveness

Assessing the impact of the process and outcomes of implemented strategies is important. After responding to the problem of suspension and expulsion at the school and developing strategies to implement, effectiveness needs to be determined. Administration and support staff need to take into consideration ways to measure the effectiveness of implemented strategies. The DisMISS Project sought to assist schools by: 1) reducing the number of students, specifically minority students, being suspended and expelled; and 2) increasing the number and quality of alternatives to suspension and expulsion options. School sites can easily measure the impact of the strategies by the annual tracking of their suspension / expulsion data and number of alternatives created. Other opportunities to further measure the impact are through school climate surveys, interviews, and general observations. Students can be great assets in the evaluation process and should be utilized.

The information used from the evaluation can be a timely resource for decision-making and

Continuous Improvement Cycles

To ensure strategy effectiveness, participating schools have employed a process that encourages and assists them in achieving continuous improvement. Continuous improvement cycles are systematic, ongoing efforts to improve a school’s overall performance.

Administrators involved all teachers and school staff to clearly define responsibilities and resources needed to ensure school improvement. This process is an ongoing cycle and changes as the needs of the school environment changes.

The core of the Continuous Improvement model is a four-stage cycle. The stages are:

- Building knowledge, understanding, and ownership of the school;
- Assessing current performance against predetermined quality requirements;
- Identifying and reviewing examples of good practice across the school; and
- Identifying and prioritizing improvements.

Continuous improvement is about working smarter to achieve success. Although schools indicated that the day-to-day activities were overwhelming, staff understood the importance of determining ways to improve practices, programs, and policies.

next steps for each school site. The aforementioned goals can be considered long-term, so it is important to also include ways to measure short-term success. The challenges that exist include the knowledge base of staff to conduct such evaluations, the administration’s “beliefs” regarding the necessity of evaluations, and the time necessary to complete evaluations. The lesson to be learned highlights the need to plan early to complete evaluations for the strategies implemented. By highlighting the expected results and measurement tools, school sites can determine early if they are indeed moving in the right direction to positively impact suspensions and expulsions.

LESSON NINE: Share Strategy Successes and Failures

Each school site involved in the DisMISS Project has experienced some successes and failures. These successes and failures are essential to strengthen sustainability efforts at each individual school. What becomes more valuable is the opportunity to share the supporting factors and barriers

Participant Meeting

Sharing strategy successes and failures was a critical component of the DisMISS Project. Project participants were given an opportunity met in Raleigh, N.C., to discuss successes and challenges for implementing selected promising strategies. This meeting also provided an opportunity for participating schools to build relationships and utilize each other as resources (See Attachment C).

to success with others. DJJDP-Center staff built into the scope of the DisMISS Project opportunities for participating schools to meet and discuss strategy implementation. Providing school sites with documentation that spelled out strategy success was important, but being able to talk to the actual

practitioner was priceless. The challenge that exists surrounds the difficulty for “guiding” school sites with successes to share to meet in a coordinated event. Although a challenge, schools should not be deterred from connecting with local and nearby school districts. Administrators may have to work with the Superintendent’s Office to coordinate the sharing of supporting factors and barriers to other schools within the local education agency (LEA).

Other challenges that may hinder the sharing process are territorial administrators and staff. Although not a problem for participating DisMISS Project sites, many administrators spoke about other schools that were hesitant to share information. Participating administrators admitted that they had been overly protective of information, but this specifically relates to information that may “cast a shadow” on the school. The importance of building a school and community consensus to address suspensions and expulsions comes to light. This challenge can certainly be diminished with

effective communication, stakeholder support, and keeping in mind the overall goal . . .the success of youth.

LESSON TEN: Understand that Early Prevention Works

Addressing the problem of increasing suspension and expulsion rates in school systems, especially as it relates to minorities, is challenging. Research and work previously engaged in by DJJDP-Center calls for looking at preventative strategies to ensure that youth stay in their seats and not the streets. Schools should consider early prevention as they attempt to assess practices, programs, and policies that may perpetuate the need for suspensions and expulsions. Participating school sites for the DisMISS Project indicated that providing teachers with the ability to manage conflict effectively reduced the number of office referrals. Strategies, such as this, need to be implemented system-wide.

The challenges that exist start with the capacity of the school to address problems proactively. A teacher from one participating school responded, “We know the youth who need more attention and help, but we have to focus more on getting students prepared to take E.O.G.’s (end of grade) tests.” Comments such as this are common, but should not preclude the schools efforts to address such problems. Attempting to build the capacity of schools starts with ensuring staff “buy-in” of early

The Violence Continuum

Participating schools all received a presentation on the importance of early prevention to reduce suspension and expulsions. DisMISS Project staff facilitated trainings on the *Violence Continuum* and opportunities for teachers to become proactive.

The continuum focuses on the importance of schools to intervene with incidents such as insults, bullying, and “put downs,” to prevent more violent occurrences. Schools indicated that although incidents such as insults are more frequent, preventative action to cease it could reduce more violent occurrences in the future.

prevention. In the school, this means immediately addressing behavioral problems before they escalate to serious violent incidents. The Violence Continuum depicts such escalation of violence and opportunities for school staff to prevent or intervene. The continuum calls for early prevention and dealing with small incidents such as insults and “put downs” before they become more serious problems (see **attachment D**). The lesson to be learned focuses on the importance of early prevention, but more so on the importance of preparing teachers and students to think in this capacity.

Conclusion

There are many lessons to be learned from the DisMISS Project and other efforts endeavored upon by the DJJDP-Center to address suspension and expulsion reduction. These lessons highlight important concepts that should assist schools and districts as they discuss potential initiatives to address suspensions and expulsions. The lessons related to such knowledge are intended to provide a general understanding and perhaps some direction to those that may want to embark on initiatives similar to the DisMISS Project. The hope is that these lessons can too be applied to other projects within educational and juvenile justice environments.



STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
Center for the Prevention of School Violence

Michael F. Easley
Governor

George L. Sweat
Secretary

Disproportionate Minority Involvement of Suspended Students Project
(DisMISS Project)

Form with fields for School Name, LEA, Principal, Contact, E-Mail, Address, Phone, Fax, and Federal Identification Number.

I agree to provide the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention – Center for the Prevention of School Violence a summary of our school, programs, and any requested discipline trends identified in our school.

Principal's Printed Name: _____

Principal's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please mail original (please keep a copy for your records) to:

DJJDP – Center for the Prevention of School Violence
Danya Perry
1801 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-1801
Phone: 1 800-299-6054 Fax: (919) 715-1208
E-mail: danya.perry@ncmail.net

I. School Demographics (2004 – 2005 school year):

Grade Levels Served: _____

Student to Teacher Ratio: _____

Total Number of Students Served: _____

Female Students	
Male Students	
African American Students	
Asian Students	
Caucasian Students	
Hispanic Students	
Native American Students	
Other	

Total Number of Instructional Staff: _____

Female Staff	
Male Staff	
African-America Staff	
Asian Staff	
Caucasian Staff	
Hispanic Staff	
Native American Staff	
Other	

2003 – 2004 school year:

Grade Levels Served: _____

Student to Teacher Ratio: _____

Total Number of Students Served: _____

Total Number of Instructional Staff: _____

Female Students	
Male Students	
African American Students	
Asian Students	
Caucasian Students	
Hispanic Students	
Native American Students	
Other	

Female Staff	
Male Staff	
African-America Staff	
Asian Staff	
Caucasian Staff	
Hispanic Staff	
Native American Staff	
Other	

2002 – 2003 school year:

Grade Levels Served: _____

Student to Teacher Ratio: _____

Total Number of Students Served: _____

Total Number of Instructional Staff: _____

Female Students	
Male Students	
African American Students	
Asian Students	
Caucasian Students	
Hispanic Students	
Native American Students	
Other	

Female Staff	
Male Staff	
African-America Staff	
Asian Staff	
Caucasian Staff	
Hispanic Staff	
Native American Staff	
Other	

2001 – 2002 school year:

Grade Levels Served: _____

Student to Teacher Ratio: _____

Total Number of Students Served: _____

Total Number of Instructional Staff: _____

Female Students	
Male Students	
African American Students	
Asian Students	
Caucasian Students	
Hispanic Students	
Native American Students	
Other	

Female Staff	
Male Staff	
African-America Staff	
Asian Staff	
Caucasian Staff	
Hispanic Staff	
Native American Staff	
Other	

2000 – 2001 school year:

Grade Levels Served: _____

Student to Teacher Ratio: _____

Total Number of Students Served: _____

Total Number of Instructional Staff: _____

Female Students	
Male Students	
African American Students	
Asian Students	
Caucasian Students	
Hispanic Students	
Native American Students	
Other	

Female Staff	
Male Staff	
African-America Staff	
Asian Staff	
Caucasian Staff	
Hispanic Staff	
Native American Staff	
Other	

II. Suspension and Expulsion Information

Please use SIMS information or other tracking information to give background of your suspension records for the school years of 2000-2001, 2001-2002, 2002-2003 and 2003 - 2004.

Overall Suspensions and Expulsions

Total Suspensions		Total Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Gender

Female Suspensions		Female Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Male Suspensions		Male Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Ethnic

Total African American Suspensions		Total African American Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total Asian Suspensions		Total Asian Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total Caucasian Suspensions		Total Caucasian Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total Hispanic Suspensions		Total Hispanic Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total Native American Suspensions		Total Native American Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total Other Suspensions		Total Other Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Grade Level

Total __ Grade Suspensions		Total __ Grade Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total __ Grade Suspensions		Total __ Grade Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total __ Grade Suspensions		Total __ Grade Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total __ Grade Suspensions		Total __ Grade Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total __ Grade Suspensions		Total __ Grade Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total __ Grade Suspensions		Total __ Grade Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

Total __ Grade Suspensions		Total __ Grade Expulsions	
2003 – 2004		2003 – 2004	
2002 – 2003		2002 – 2003	
2001 – 2002		2001 – 2002	
2000 – 2001		2000 – 2001	

“Promising Strategies” Implemented by DisMISS Project School Sites

School	Parental Involvement	Alternative Placement	School Climate	Leadership	Staff Development	Community Involvement
A.L. Stanback Middle School	X	X	X	X	X	
Asheville Middle School	X		X	X	X	X
Ayden Middle School				X	X	
Bell Fork Elementary School			X	X	X	
Central Middle School		X	X	X	X	
Harnett Central Middle School		X	X	X	X	
Henderson Middle School		X	X	X	X	X
Mattamuskeet Middle School		X	X	X	X	
Northview Middle School	X	X	X	X	X	X
Red Springs High School			X	X	X	
Riverroad Middle School		X	X	X	X	
Rohanen Jr. High School		X	X	X	X	X
Southwestern Middle School	X	X	X	X	X	
Woodlawn Middle School		X	X	X	X	



STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
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DisMISS Project Participant Meeting

The Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention - Center for the Prevention of School Violence (DJJDP – Center) is working on a federal grant which focuses on educational alternatives to disproportionate minority suspensions and expulsions in North Carolina’s public schools. DJJDP – Center’s efforts in the DisMISS (**Dis**proportionate **Minority Involvement of Suspended Students**) Project seek to implement promising strategies identified through a previous grant entitled Project EASE (**Educational Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion**). Project EASE was intended to reduce disproportionate minority suspension and expulsion rates in participating schools through the identification and dissemination of promising strategies. The DisMISS Project focuses on assisting schools in their implementation of selected promising strategies gathered from Project EASE. Participating schools review all promising strategies with DJJDP - Center DisMISS Project staff. Promising strategies to be implemented at the schools are decided based upon the needs and desires of the schools. The DisMISS Project Participant Meeting held on July 12, 2004 was for participating schools to build relationships and utilize each other as resources.

The following sections highlight strategies discussed during the meeting. The strategies include: community resources, school calendars, school rules, and staff developments.

Community Resources

The Asheville Mediation Center is utilized and paid by Asheville City Schools to help “teachers, students, and staff more effectively address communication difficulties, conflict, anger, bullying, and cultural differences.” (See Attachment) Representatives are available at the schools for twenty hours per week in addition to the services available directly from the center. The services are available for conflicts between student-to-student, student-to-staff, staff-to-staff, staff-to-parent, and families. Appointments are made on a referral basis by any of the previously mentioned parties or an outsider observing the conflict. Once a referral is made all parties have the option of not attending. There was an approximate success rate of sixty percent (60%) for all Asheville Middle School referrals. The mediation center has also made available for purchase a conflict resolution curriculum, TRIBE, for middle school personnel.

School Calendars

The main goal in utilizing school calendars is organization with an additional result of increased communication, when used effectively. Participants expressed organizational skills at the middle school level are minimal and the calendars are intended to develop those skills by keeping all essential school information in one place. The first section of school calendars provides school rules and expectations with places for students and parents to sign upon review. The calendars also have spaces for academic assignments, school activities, and communication between parents and teachers. Additionally, hall passes

are included in the calendar to enable communication between teachers concerning the frequency of students leaving class. Students are required to use school calendars throughout the school year and should be trained on calendar use when they are issued. If a student loses their school issued calendar they are held responsible for replacing it. Schools keep additional calendars for students who cannot afford this cost. Training for staff on the proper use of the calendars was also highlighted. Participants felt if school staffs do not properly implement them the affect will be lessened.

School Rules

The goal of establishing school rules is to have consistency for students while on school property. Staff collected school discipline data to determine areas of concern. Once these areas were determined, surveys were given to students, staff, and parents to gain their insight on how to address the areas of concern. Organization of data collected and survey results by the school discipline team was key when developing school rules. All participants expressed the need to explicitly define those areas of concern to minimize room for misinterpretation.

Staff Developments

Staff development time is needed to keep school personnel update on new trends in education. All schools face a shortage of staff development time, to address this issue one participating school's local education agency (LEA) has built into their school calendars half instructional / half staff development days. This school also conducts staff developments with surrounding schools and LEAs to better utilize resources.

Miscellaneous

Reducing suspensions is one of the overall goals of the DisMISS Project. Participants discussed utilizing suspension pending parental conference (SPPC) as one mechanism to reduce suspensions. SPPCs allow one last opportunity for students not to be suspended by allowing parents and administrators the opportunity to discuss behavior before the student misses instructional time. The same LEA has also worked with its local chamber of commerce to ensure employees give parents three hours per school year of compensation time for parental conferences.

The following sections highlight comments given by participants and DJJDP staff.

Participant Comments

The meeting concluded with participants giving comments on the day. They were all pleased to hear the issues each faced concerning the behaviors that lead to suspension were not specific to their area. While all have strategies in place to address these issues all schools can do better by utilizing each other as resources for additional strategies. Participants also expressed their gratitude in knowing other administrators dedication to addressing these issues. Finally, attendees conveyed the importance of being able to come together with other administrators across the state to talk about the issues and strategies utilized in making effective change in their school.

DJJDP Staff Comments

This meeting solidified many of the concerns held by DJJDP – Center. DJJDP – Center has known the value of a standardized state discipline code for school systems however during the discussions of school rules it was made apparent that this issue is unresolved. Schools all expressed the need for clear definitions of incidents to ensure universal implementation and operation. Another observation made was the possible

usefulness of the strategies in the Youth Development Centers. DJJDP – Center realized the value of hosting a framed meeting with open discussion of the issues facing the schools of North Carolina. These meetings allow for knowledge to be shared and received by host and attendees. Finally, this meeting reiterated the importance of the DisMISS Project and a statewide community of resources for schools.

Next Steps

DJJDP – Center will continue its efforts with the DisMISS Project. Project staff will further their efforts in recruiting additional sites for participation. The staff will continue to develop communication mechanisms for project participants to utilize.