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REMOTE INSTRUCTION AS SUSPENSION: CONCERNS AND GUIDANCE

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Introduction

Removing students from the classroom and placing them in remote instruction for their behavior is an emerging form of discipline (Jones, 2020). The purpose of this brief is to describe this form of discipline, examine its implications and potential negative impacts, and provide guiding principles for improving behavior through evidence-based approaches.



What is Remote Instruction as Suspension?

Remote instruction as suspension is a form of classroom removal in which administrators remove students from that setting for behavioral reasons and provide alternative instruction by use of remote instruction technology. Students might be sent to another location in the school or sent home to continue receiving their typical classroom instruction via videoconference software, an alternative curriculum provided one-to-one, or asynchronous e-learning. This practice is distinct from a student or family choice to attend online or remote education full time (or a temporary shift to remote instruction during a period of quarantine).

Why Might Remote Instruction as Suspension Seem Appealing?

Since the global health pandemic, districts and schools have invested and gained experience in using remote instruction technology, and the return to in-person schooling means that educators have a surplus of devices and curricula. Providing remote instruction could seem like a preferable disciplinary action because the student exhibiting disruptive behavior is physically removed from the classroom, but the school may still be able to fulfill the promise of giving the student access to the same instruction their peers are receiving. However, questions remain about the quality of instruction and implications of remote instruction as a disciplinary consequence.



What are the Negative Consequences?

Although remote instruction as suspension is relatively novel, it still is a form of suspension. We can learn from the extensive research evidence documenting the negative effects of exclusionary suspension on important student outcomes. Although educators might intend suspension to deter future student misbehavior, studies show the opposite effect (Gregory et al., 2010; LiCalsi et al., 2021; Massar et al., 2015). For example, students who experience suspension have a decreased sense of school belonging and academic achievement and an increase in the likelihood of being involved with the juvenile justice system (Anyon et al., 2016; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2019; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Considering the potential impact of remote instruction as suspensions on students and families will be helpful to improving their school experiences and maintaining positive school-family partnerships (Green et al., 2018; Green et al., 2021).



What are the Legal Concerns?

Districts and schools have responded to the pandemic with greater flexibility in their policies, practices, and procedures. However, generally speaking, federal and state laws protecting students' rights to an education, equity, free speech, privacy, and Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities, have remained unchanged (Jameson et al., 2020; U. S. Department of Education Office [USDE], 2020).

Placement

District and school administrators might consider remote instruction as suspension to be the same instruction delivered in a different location, but students and families might consider it to be an inordinate supervision burden, a change of placement to a more restrictive environment, or as being denied FAPE for students with disabilities, especially if done for long periods of time or repeatedly (Belsha, 2020).

Privacy

In addition, remote instruction as suspension may expose students to additional risks beyond those of students attending in person. For teachers, what they see in the background of the student's video camera is considered part of school and school grounds. For students and families, it may be viewed as an invasion of home and privacy. It can inequitably expose students to further discipline based on what may be acceptable at home but not at school.

What are the Behavior Concerns?

Moving students to remote instruction as discipline might be viewed as a viable or even preferable

alternative to suspension without remote instruction. However, its impact on student outcomes is unknown. If we liken remote instruction as suspension to traditional suspension, there are likely more negative than positive effects (Sparks, 2021).

When deciding how to support and respond to student behavior, it is helpful to consider the following questions about potential unintended consequences:

- Will it provide an opportunity for students to learn and practice social, emotional, and behavioral skills to set them up for success in the future?
- Will it reward unwanted behavior for students who seek to avoid being in the classroom, resulting in an increase in unwanted behavior?
- Will it reward adult behavior, resulting in an increase in removals?
- For students who seek to obtain attention from adults or peers, will the webcam and audio serve as opportunities for disruption, as well as embarrassment if a student is muted or removed from the room?
- Is the student likely to turn off audio or video, resulting in a potential loss of academic engagement?

The more frequently students are in remote instruction as suspension and the more frequently teachers and students are at odds over audio and video being turned off, the more likely districts and schools will be challenged over not providing FAPE or education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities, especially for those experiencing barriers to learning remotely.



Guiding Principles

PBIS provides schools a research-based, culturally responsive, family-oriented framework for (a) teaching and supporting students social, emotional, and behavioral skills and (b) implementing and monitoring instructional responses to unwanted behavior. School leadership teams are encouraged to revise discipline policies for remote instruction and explicitly include evidence-based practices that improve the school climate, promote skill development, enhance student well-being, and reduce disproportionality in school systems. Remote instruction as suspension is not advisable as a common practice, given that suspension does not deter students from engaging in contextually inappropriate behaviors, nor is this practice beneficial to the outcomes of peers engaging in contextually appropriate behavior (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019).

One exception to this consideration is in instances in which safety is a concern, and removing the student from in-person classroom instruction reduces harm to themselves or their peers. The use of remote instruction as suspension in this specific situation should be monitored closely and used sparingly. As with typical suspension, remote instruction as suspension should be used only when safety is a concern, and districts and schools should develop clear decision rules for when remote instruction as suspension can be used, how often it can be used, and what data will be gathered to determine the

effects on students. And, more importantly, this practice should trigger a review of proactive, positive, and instructionally-focused supports to minimize the likelihood for future suspensions.

Conclusion

In the wake of pandemic stay-home orders relaxing and students returning to school, districts and schools find themselves with an unused inventory of remote instruction technology and students who experience difficulties adjusting to being back in school. Moving students to remote instruction as suspension, if not handled with care, could increase rates of unwanted behavior, harm academic and social-emotional-behavioral growth, and lead to dropout. PBIS provides districts and schools a framework that can incorporate behavioral interventions that are positive, proactive, evidence based, equitable, and family centering. School teams are encouraged to [use well-established and evidence-based approaches](#)* that teach students positive alternative behaviors to promote academic engagement and social emotional well-being.

* <https://www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-and-responding-to-behavior-evidence-based-classroom-strategies-for-teachers>



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