

ZERO-TOLERANCE DISCIPLINE APPROACHES:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM EXEMPLARY  
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

By

TIMOTHY L. KRUSE

Bachelor of Arts/Science in Secondary Education  
Oklahoma State University  
Stillwater, Oklahoma  
1997

Master of Arts/Science in Adult Education  
University of Central Oklahoma  
Edmond, Oklahoma  
2007

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
May, 2012

ZERO-TOLERANCE DISCIPLINE APPROACHES:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM EXEMPLARY  
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Dissertation Approved:

---

Dr. Bernita Krumm, Dissertation Adviser

---

Dr. Ed Harris

---

Dr. Kerri Kearney

---

Dr. Pam Brown

---

Dr. Sheryl A. Tucker, Dean of the Graduate College

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY.....	1
Researcher Statement.....	4
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Research Questions.....	7
Conceptual Framework.....	7
Methodology.....	14
Significance of the Study.....	15
Limitations.....	16
Delimitations.....	16
Assumptions.....	16
Definitions.....	17
Summary.....	17
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	19
Introduction.....	19
What is Zero Tolerance?.....	19
What are the Factors that Surround Zero-Tolerance Policies?.....	21
What is an Alternative Education School?.....	22
Characteristics of a Typical Alternative Education Program.....	22
Description of the Typical Alternative Education Student.....	24
Why are Zero-Tolerance Policies Criticized?.....	25
Current Legislative Response to Zero-Tolerance Policies.....	28
Summary.....	29
III. METHODOLOGY.....	30
Introduction.....	30
Procedure.....	30
Participants.....	32
Instrumentation.....	32
Data Collection Procedures.....	33
Data Analysis.....	34

Trustworthiness.....	35
Data Storage.....	36
Ethical Considerations .....	37
Support and Permissions Necessary .....	37
Summary.....	37
IV. REPORT OF FINDINGS .....	39
Introduction.....	39
Truman Alternative Academy.....	40
Tony, Truman Academy student.....	42
Nick, Truman Academy student .....	45
Laura, Truman Academy Executive Director .....	48
Paula, Truman Academy Therapeutic Counselor .....	54
Marcy, Truman Academy Therapeutic Counselor.....	56
Mark, Truman Academy Teacher .....	59
Cleveland Alternative Academy .....	64
Thomas, Cleveland Academy Principal.....	66
Mandy, Cleveland Academy Teacher.....	72
Martha, Cleveland Academy Teacher.....	74
Nathan, Cleveland Academy Student .....	76
Jill, Cleveland Academy Student.....	78
Kyle, Cleveland Academy Therapeutic Counselor.....	79
Adams Alternative Academy.....	83
Karen, Adams Academy Principal; and Lori, Adams Academy Teacher .....	84
Alex, Adams Academy Student.....	88
Alan, Adams Academy Student.....	90
Carrie, Adams Academy Teacher .....	92
Additional Data.....	95
Summary.....	100
V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	103
Summary.....	103
Results.....	105
Relationship of Results to Theory.....	109
Conclusions.....	114
Recommendations for Practice .....	117
Recommendations for Future Research .....	120
Final Thoughts .....	120
REFERENCES .....	122
APPENDICES .....	128

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
Table 1, Contemporary Discipline Models .....	8

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure A, Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs .....	9

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

*Eight-year-old "Jenny" was suspended from her 3rd-grade class for two days for bringing a pair of cuticle scissors to open the wrapper on her school breakfast. Under the school's zero tolerance policy, Jenny's teacher believed she had no choice but to report Jenny to the principal. Humiliated and traumatized, Jenny missed two days of school, and now has a suspension on her permanent school record. (Brownstein, 2010)*

*A teacher observed 12-year-old Adam L., an A student, filing his nails with a miniature Swiss Army knife; for violating the school's anti-weapons policy, the youth received a one-year expulsion. (Zirkel, 1999)*

*"Joseph" was 13 when the bullying against him started. Under his school's strict discipline rules, all students involved in a fight received the same punishment, regardless of who started it. After several fights that resulted in repeated, multi-day, out-of-school suspensions, Joseph fell further and further behind, failed the 7th grade, and became increasingly alienated from his school. He eventually dropped out. (Brownstein, 2010)*

School administrators' subjective "one-strike-you're-out" enforcement of "zero tolerance" discipline policies using the exclusionary practice of suspension or expulsion to push the disciplined students out of mainstream school seems to frequently occur. Students subjected to exclusionary zero tolerance discipline actions like suspension and expulsion, even a single

time, are more likely to become repeat offenders, to dropout, to attend a dropout recovery alternative school, and/or enter the juvenile justice system (Skiba and Peterson, 1999). This process happens with such disturbing frequency it has earned its own nickname: the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Brownstein, 2010). This term describes the harsh school discipline policies and practices that practically push students out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Weissman, 2009).

Zero tolerance has its roots in the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA), written by legislators in response to public concern about the seemingly overwhelming increase in school violence during the 1990s. Media frenzy at this time period focused on school violence; this in turn focused public awareness on school safety and pressured legislators to take steps to produce gun-free schools. The intent of the Act was to impact specific problems with school safety and discipline; it accomplished this by making Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) funds contingent upon a state’s enactment of zero-tolerance laws. The Act made federal school funding dollars contingent upon the local adoption of strict school discipline policies that mandated expulsion for weapons possession (Martin, 2000); all 50 states adopted some variation of the law.

Some administrators interpret the GFSA in a much broader sense than legislators intended, treating both minor and major incidents with equal severity using the excuse of “mandated zero-tolerance” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). While the Gun-Free Schools Act requires a one-year expulsion only for possession of a weapon, some school districts go beyond the intent of the Act by extending zero tolerance to other infractions in an effort to standardize and simplify discipline (McAndrews, 2001). Over time, many jurisdictions came to apply mandatory expulsion policies to other behaviors including drug possession, fighting, and even lesser “offenses” such as swearing (Skiba & Knesting, 2001).

A study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that zero-tolerance policies had little effect at previously unsafe schools; the center also reported that the data did not



demonstrate a dramatic decrease in school-based violence (Ashford, 2000). The popularity of zero-tolerance policies may be less about actual results and more about projecting an image to the community that administration is actively taking measures to prevent violence in schools. Whether the policies actually change student behavior may be less important than the reassurance it gives the school community at large (Ashford, 2000).

Schools have a powerful role as “social institutions” (Weissman, 2009, p. 184). Critics of zero-tolerance discipline practices find it contradictory that the relatively new discipline paradigm of zero tolerance encourages schools to push a child out of education rather than take the time to create opportunities and initiatives that would productively retain and engage young people. Weissman further claims that through superficial and hasty initial responses to student misbehavior, schools instead may keep pushing kids further down the school-to-prison pipeline.

Students who are not in school are on the streets and, more often than not, get into more serious trouble than they would at school. Zero-tolerance policies have increased the number of students considered for expulsion, and limited school administrators’ choices when dealing with marginal infractions (Stader, 2000). For example, almost 6 percent of administrators classified weapons possession as “*not at all violent*” while another 6 percent of administrators rated pushing in line to be first “*an extremely violent act*”(Weissman, 2009). These varied opinions and contradictory views translate into real life differences in how students are disciplined, with outcomes depending on the viewpoint of a particular school administrator (Weissman, 2009).

On July 21, 2011, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder announced a joint effort to respond to the school-to-prison pipeline by “supporting good discipline practices” (U. S. Department of Justice, 2011). Duncan and Holder announced the launch of the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, a “collaborative project between the Departments of Justice and Education that will address the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ and the discipline policies and practices that can push students out of school and into the justice system”(p. 1). The initiative aims to: 1) build consensus for action among federal, state and local

education and justice stakeholders; 2) collaborate on research and data collection that may be needed to inform this work, such as evaluations of alternative discipline policies and interventions; 3) develop guidance to ensure that school discipline policies and practices comply with the nation's civil rights laws and to promote positive discipline options to both keep kids in school and improve the climate for learning; and 4) promote awareness and knowledge about evidence-based and promising policies and practices among state judicial and education leadership (U. S. Department of Justice, 2011). This Supportive School Discipline Initiative demonstrates that legislators are focused on improving education by enhancing the behavioral approaches used in schools.

### **Researcher Statement**

I am a 50 year old white male with 15 years teaching experience; six of those years have been at Adams Alternative Academy, one of the schools investigated in this study. My interest in discipline began at the age of 35 when I earned my bachelor's degree and began teaching at a small rural school. This university education fills one's head with lots of airy and idealistic goals, but is unfortunately lacking in preparing a teacher for disciplining his first class. Luckily, the small rural schools I taught at for my first three years had well-behaved students with supportive parents at home, and the strict discipline practices I employed with my own children were well received by these farm kids.

However, when I moved to an urban junior high school and was assigned the lower-ability math classes, I had many more discipline problems and regularly (as instructed by my administrators) sent students to the office for a variety of minor infractions. At the end of that first junior high year, my principal and assistant principals sat me down and informed me that I had the highest number of office referrals out of all 40 teachers. I was shocked to be disciplined myself, thinking I was a model employee by sending rule-breakers to the office exactly as instructed. I set out to learn a new discipline skill set. Since the parents of my lower-ability math students were rarely involved or interested in how their child behaved at school, I investigated

and collected a set of strict discipline practices I successfully used to discipline students without involving parents or administration. I taught three more years before an emotionally disturbed student slammed my classroom door, breaking my window and my streak of not sending a single student to the office.

Armed with my new set of discipline practices, I transferred to Adams Alternative Academy. I felt I had taught the worst behaved students in the district, come out on top, and was ready to tackle the world of alternative education. My strict discipline policies, used so successfully at the junior high, were met with rebellion and quickly proved useless at the alternative school. These students, as a rule, had so much violence and rage in their home lives that the last thing they needed at school was another adult bullying them and laying down arbitrary laws. Again, I had to reinvent myself and learn yet another discipline skill set. The key to discipline at the alternative school, I discovered, is do not yell, do not bully, and do not threaten in any way. It is all about keeping the student calm. After six years in alternative education, I feel I have mastered this latest discipline skill set, and I now seek to move into administration. My hope is that the results of the study will help me become an effective alternative school administrator by providing me with the most up-to-date information on successful discipline practices that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting.

### **Problem Statement**

Zero-tolerance was legislators' response to public concern about the seemingly overwhelming increase in school violence during the 1990s. Legislators wrote the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) with intent of making schools safer by mandating strict school discipline policies that required expulsion for weapons possession (Martin, 2000). The passage of the GFSA caused the number of student suspensions and expulsions to dramatically increase, and subsequently caused an explosion in the number of alternative schools created as a means to deal with the ever increasing numbers of students excluded from mainstream school.

However, while the GFSA was written with the intent of eliminating weapons in schools, most school administrators interpreted the Act in a much broader sense than the legislators who sponsored the GFSA intended, treating both minor and major incidents with equal severity using the excuse of “mandated zero-tolerance” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). While the Gun-Free Schools Act required a one-year expulsion only for possession of a weapon, over time many school districts applied harsh, mandatory expulsion consequences for lesser offenses (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Sweeten, 2006). These exclusionary discipline practices—suspension, expulsion, referral to alternative school or the juvenile justice system—increased the chance that a student would drop out of school. Since high school dropouts are five times more likely to go to prison than high school graduates (Weissman, 2009), these policies have had a “push-out” effect that quietly encouraged students to drop out of school and into the juvenile justice system, in what has come to be known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Brownstein, 2010).

School districts’ exclusionary zero-tolerance policies in many cases were an over-reaction to relatively minor offenses, and the application of these strict policies negatively impacted student achievement. The ever-increasing numbers of suspensions and expulsions have not proven to significantly improve school safety (Ashford, 2000). Therefore, a better understanding of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline approaches is needed, as well as discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, and to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting. Research was focused on investigating current discipline practices and alternatives from the perspectives of the population in transit, so to speak, on the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Brownstein, 2010); the students and staff in alternative school settings. The

results of this study will add to the research and data collection needed to inform Goals 2 and 3 of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's Supportive School Discipline Initiative.

### **Research Questions**

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround current zero-tolerance discipline approaches?
2. What are discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting?

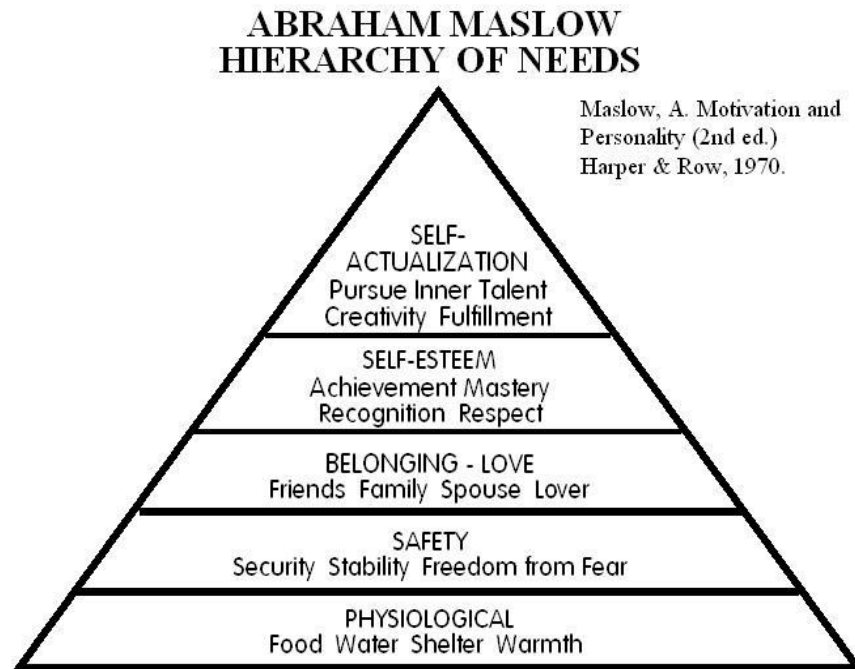
### **Conceptual Framework**

Since the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, as well as to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting, several contemporary discipline models were used to frame this study. These models were referenced to describe present perspectives of zero-tolerance discipline policies, and were employed to frame participants' suggested discipline alternatives. The following discipline models (see Table 1, below) were arranged in chronological order to illustrate how discipline models have evolved through the years.

Table 1. Contemporary Discipline Models

<p>Abraham Maslow (1943)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• if a person’s basic physiological and safety needs are not met, the individual feels anxious and tense</li> <li>• if a child’s deficiency needs are not met, it unlikely the student will be able to focus on his studies</li> </ul>
<p>Fritz Redl and William Wattenberg (1959)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people in groups behave differently than they do individually</li> <li>• teachers should anticipate a “ripple effect” of undesirable behaviors</li> </ul>
<p>B. F. Skinner (1971)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• behavior could be shaped with the proper, systematic application of reinforcement</li> <li>• reinforcement can be positive (receiving candy as a reward) or negative (getting out of a test by successfully telling a lie), but either will strengthen the behavior</li> </ul>
<p>Haim Ginott (1971)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• build classroom discipline through open communication</li> <li>• students learn through trial-and-error—if a teacher responds in an understanding manner when a child makes a mistake, the child will be more willing to experiment</li> <li>• discipline can be more effective if administered through small, gentle steps rather than tough and strong tactics</li> </ul>
<p>Jacob Kounin (1977)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reduce behavior incidents through the use of effective lesson management, lesson pacing, and student accountability</li> <li>• use ripple effect by giving public encouragements and reprimands to disruptive student</li> <li>• if students perceive the teacher to be “with it” they are less likely to misbehave</li> </ul>
<p>William Glasser (1977)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children choose misbehavior</li> <li>• teacher’s duty is to show students how to make good choices</li> </ul>
<p>Lee Canter (1978)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• speak and act assertively while remaining firmly neutral</li> <li>• show no bias when following the established discipline plan</li> <li>• any student who breaks the rule must pay the price</li> </ul>
<p>Rudolf Dreikurs (1982)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teach students self-discipline by showing students how to impose limits on themselves</li> <li>• autocratic teachers force their will on the class</li> <li>• permissive teachers create unrealistic classroom atmosphere</li> <li>• democratic teachers establish rules and consequences, and provide firm guidance</li> </ul>
<p>Alfie Kohn (1996)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• de-emphasis on the power of praise—felt praise not really required at all</li> <li>• teachers abuse praise to gain student compliance</li> <li>• focus should be on “working with” students instead of “doing to” them</li> <li>• “Children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions” (Kohn, 2005, p. 22).</li> </ul>
<p>Linda Albert (1999)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students need a sense of belonging, and misbehave for specific reasons</li> <li>• teacher has power to influence, but not control, their choices</li> <li>• students will misbehave again unless they are shown strategies to choose appropriate behavior</li> </ul>

Many discipline models reference Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow (1943) described his theory for human motivation and behavior through the use of a pyramid shaped diagram he named the Hierarchy of Needs, as shown in Figure A (Maslow, 1970).



*Figure A.* Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Maslow described the first four layers of the pyramid as deficiency needs. At the bottom are the most immediate human physiological needs such as food and water. Above this level are the need to feel safe, then the need to love and belong, then the need for self-esteem and confidence. Finally, at the top of Maslow's pyramid is the need for self-actualization factors such as creativity and the pursuit of inner talent. Maslow posited—with the exception of the most fundamental (physiological) needs—that if these deficiency needs are not met, the body gives no physical indication, but the individual feels anxious and tense. Applied to the school setting, this means that if a child's deficiency needs are not met, it is unlikely the student will be able to focus on his studies.

Fritz Redl and William Wattenberg (1959) addressed the concept that people in groups behave differently than they do individually. By recognizing which roles students assume in the classroom, teachers are better prepared for different types of disruptions. Redl and Wattenberg encouraged teachers to anticipate certain behaviors; be ready to handle a ripple effect of undesirable behaviors from the other members of the group; investigate the incident and participants in depth; and finally resolve the situation. The Redl and Wattenberg Model gave teachers the first well-organized, systematic approach to improving student behavior in the classroom. The major disadvantage of the model is that it is unrealistic to expect teachers in secondary schools to have the time to carry out in-depth diagnoses of students' needs with the large numbers of students under their care.

Behavior psychologist B. F. Skinner (1971) demonstrated behavior could be shaped along desired lines with the proper, systematic application of reinforcement. Skinner stated reinforcement can be positive (receiving candy as a reward) or negative (getting out of a test by successfully telling a lie), but either of these reinforcements will strengthen the behavior and cause it to be repeated. Skinner was also careful to distinguish between reinforcement and punishment, explaining that reinforcement strengthens behavior whereas punishment suppresses behavior. Advantages of the Skinner Model are that teachers appreciate its powerful effects of shaping behavior through reinforcement, and see it not as manipulating students, but rather freeing them from their distracting bad behaviors. Disadvantages of the Skinner Model are that students may respond to peer reinforcement rather than to teacher reinforcement, and if teachers abuse discipline then students will see it as unfair and feel alienated.

Haim Ginott (1971) provided strategies to build classroom discipline through open communication. He believed students learn through trial-and-error; therefore, if a teacher is understanding when a child makes a mistake, the child will be more willing to continue learning and experiencing. He showed how effective discipline can be had through small, gentle steps rather than tough and strong tactics. Ginott discouraged the use of punishment, believing that by



focusing on the situation—not the student—and by finding alternative means for discipline besides punishment, the teacher can make discipline in the classroom a learning experience for all students. Ginott's model builds a teacher-student rapport, but a disadvantage of his model is that his strategies for addressing discipline problems were described in very broad terms.

Jacob Kounin's (1977) discipline model focuses on reducing behavior incidents through the use of effective lesson management, lesson pacing, and student accountability. Kounin claimed maintaining the momentum of a lesson and challenging students with a variety of activities will improve classroom behavior. Kounin also referenced the ripple effect by encouraging teachers to give public encouragements and reprimands to the disruptive student. He felt all students react to the encouragements and reprimands—not just the disruptive student. Finally, Kounin emphasized the importance of “with-it-ness,” or being able to know what is going on in all areas of the classroom at all times. Kounin found that if students perceive the teacher to be “with it” they are less likely to misbehave. An advantage of Kounin's model is that it offers suggestions on preventing behavioral problems from occurring, but a disadvantage is that it does not provide strategies for dealing with serious problems when they arise.

William Glasser (1977) insisted that children choose misbehavior—nothing forces them to behave as they do. He contended that since bad behavior is a choice, it is a teacher's duty to show students how to make good choices. Glasser referenced Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and stressed the role of the teacher in meeting deficiency needs so a student will be successful. An advantage of Glasser's model is that it stresses cooperation between teacher and student, giving students a voice in rules and consequences. A disadvantage of this model is that while Glasser felt it important to identify and satisfy each child's needs; in reality this may be difficult to do during a relatively short class period, and the meetings and discussions involved in these investigations with students monopolize teachers' instructional time.

Lee Canter (1978) founded a form of corrective discipline called the Assertive Discipline model. Canter showed teachers a corrective discipline model that stressed speaking and acting in

an assertive manner while remaining calm, firmly neutral, and businesslike. Expectations should be clear, rules simple, consequences appropriate, and rewards realistic. Assertive Discipline is unique from other discipline plans in that it encourages punishment; these may be timeouts, loss of privileges, detention, parent conference, office referral, or other similar consequences. Canter stressed that teachers show no bias when following the established discipline plan; any student who breaks the rule must pay the price.

The advantage of Canter's easy to implement model is it is simple to use and clearly shows teachers a method of immediately dealing with inappropriate behavior. Some disadvantages are that many teachers and parents find it too harsh and aggressive, and useful only as a short term solution. It is also so clear cut that it does not allow students to learn from their mistakes. Finally, the model encourages a one-size-fits-all discipline method that does not guide teachers to better understand children and the underlying causes for their misbehavior.

Rudolf Dreikurs (Dreikurs & Pepper, 1982) believed discipline is not punishment. He identified true discipline as synonymous with self-discipline, and encouraged showing students how to impose limits on themselves. He believed students misbehave for four reasons; to seek attention, gain power, take revenge, or display inadequacy. Teachers should quickly identify the mistaken goals and act to avoid their reinforcement. Dreikurs organized teachers into three types: autocratic, permissive, and democratic. Autocratic teachers force their will on the class in order to control the class, which tends to perpetuate problem behavior. Permissive teachers generate problem behavior because the classroom atmosphere they create is not based on everyday reality. Students in this classroom do not learn that breaking the rules results in adverse consequences. A democratic teacher is neither autocratic nor permissive. They establish rules and consequences, and provide firm guidance and leadership. Students in a democratic classroom are free to choose behavior, because they understand that consequences follow their choice of behavior. Understanding consequences helps students develop inner control.

Dreikurs' encouragement of student effort and responsibility has the potential to bring about genuine attitudinal changes in students. It promotes respect between student and teacher, and allows students a degree of autonomy as they develop self-control. A disadvantage of the model is that Dreikurs does not specifically address the challenge of inappropriate or defiant behavior, which critics feel needs immediate attention.

Linda Albert (Albert, 1999) extended Dreikurs' ideas in her book *Cooperative Discipline*. Cooperative discipline established a partnership between students, teachers, and parents. Albert believed that student behavior is based on choice, students need a sense of belonging, and students misbehave for specific reasons. Albert's method used the democratic teaching style Dreikurs described, and recognized the diverse needs of students. Teachers were expected to maintain a truthful positive outlook, viewing each student as valuable and worthy. They were also expected to exhibit great self-control in the midst of misbehavior, conducting themselves with a business-like attitude. Albert stressed that students choose their behavior, and the teacher has power to influence, but not control, their choices. The Cooperative Discipline model assumed that students will misbehave again unless they are shown strategies to choose appropriate behavior. These strategies must also be accompanied by encouragement techniques that build self-esteem and strengthen the students' desire to cooperate and learn. Albert's model expanded on Dreikurs theory by offering specific strategies for classroom management to deal with the multiple causes of misbehavior.

Alfie Kohn (1996) proposed a discipline model that challenged widely accepted discipline theories and practices and is controversial in its de-emphasis on the power of praise and common classroom management practices. Kohn saw praise as "just one more symptom of a culture of overindulgence, right alongside grade inflation, helicopter parenting, excessive focus on self-esteem, and the practice of handing out trophies to all the participants" (Kohn, 2012) He continued that praise was just one more exercise in terms of "sugar-coated control," and signaled to the student a sort of conditional acceptance—as long as the student behaved in a certain way,

the teacher would like the student. Kohn felt that to the extent teachers want to teach the importance of making an effort, praise really is not required at all. Kohn complained that teachers who used praise as part of their classroom management strategy were more interested in student compliance rather than teaching a student how to become a problem-solver. He emphasized learning through actively working through problems and projects, rather than checking off a preordained set of mastered facts and figures. He summarized his model by advising teachers to focus on “working with” students instead of controlling them by “doing to” them, professing “children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions” (2005, p. 22).

### **Methodology**

Yin (2003) stated the case study is “the preferred research strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are posed, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 1). Case study was appropriate for this study because while I had a great deal of control over the discipline strategies used in my classroom, I had little or no control over discipline administered in the district. The unexpected factors surrounding zero tolerance discipline policies qualified this research as a study of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life education context.

A case study is employed to explain reasons for a problem and give better understanding of bounded situations. Creswell (2007) described case study research as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case *description* and case-based themes” (p. 73). The intent of this study was to give a better understanding of the bounded situation of the factors associated with zero tolerance discipline approaches. I collected data about discipline alternatives through the use of observation, informal and conversational interviews, quotations from formal interviews, follow up telephone

interviews, email communication, and excerpts from literature that participants suggest be read to better understand the problem.

Qualitative case studies are distinguished in many ways. According to Creswell (2007), case studies may be distinguished in terms of the intent of the case analysis. From this perspective there are three variations with respect to intent: the single instrumental case study, the collective or multiple case study, and the intrinsic case study. Stake (1995) explained that in a single instrumental case study the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue. In a collective or multiple case study, one issue or concern is again selected, but the researcher might select several programs from several different sites in an effort to illustrate the issue. In the intrinsic case study, the focus is on the case itself, which often is of unusual or unique nature (e.g., evaluating a program, or studying a student having difficulty—see Stake, 1995). This study was a multiple case study that shows multiple perspectives on the same issue of perceptions of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline and the search for non-exclusionary discipline practices. Although Creswell (2007) claimed qualitative researchers are usually reluctant to generalize from one case to another because the context of cases differ, Yin (2003) suggested that generalization may be possible if the researcher uses the logic of replication—e.g., the researcher replicates the procedures for each case. By replicating this study at three different sites and analyzing multiple perspectives of the research questions, I hoped to discover and collect successfully used non-exclusionary discipline practices that can reliably be generalized to other high school populations.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research study has the potential to improve student achievement by presenting school administrators with alternatives to inappropriate or excessive school discipline. The study will build upon the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights' work to increase and enhance the school discipline data available by extending the inquiry about why and how youth are "pushed out" of school by current zero-tolerance discipline approaches. Finally, results of the

study will contribute to research about positive, non-exclusionary interventions that have proven effective when used with the at-risk school population at alternative schools. This knowledge of proven, positive discipline techniques can then be transferred to mainstream school districts by sharing the information with administration and staff in an effort to reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions handed down for relatively minor offenses. This study will provide educators with information about adequate and effective tools for implementing best practices for a particular population.

### **Limitations**

The research focused on alternative school programs during the 2011-2012 school year. The study will be limited to three alternative education high schools recognized as exemplary by a Midwestern state foundation. Teachers, students, and administrators who had not participated in the phenomenon of zero-tolerance discipline and alternative positive discipline approaches were not invited to participate in this study. Individuals under the age of 18 did not participate in the study. The results from this study cannot necessarily be generalized to all alternative schools in Oklahoma, since each of the currently 250 alternative academy programs in Oklahoma (Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center, 2010) operates in the location and manner their particular Board of Education dictates.

### **Delimitations**

The study was delimited to include the occasional relevant contributions from people not directly involved in the day-to-day operation of the alternative school, such as parents and members of upper level administration.

### **Assumptions**

One assumption was that the participants were familiar enough with at-risk intervention approaches to comment on them with some depth. Another assumption was that students and school staff would express themselves honestly and openly. A further assumption was that school leaders would recognize the importance of considering the self-esteem of at-risk students

as well as addressing the social and academic progress of students in alternative environments. An important assumption was that I, as an alternative school educator, would not let personal bias influence the outcome of the current study.

### **Definitions**

An *alternative education high school* is defined as a school designed to educate youth identified as being at-risk for school failure (Foley, 2006). In 2002 the U.S. Department of Education defined an alternative education school as a “public elementary or secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.55).

*A Nation At Risk*, published in 1983, included President Reagan’s message to the National Academy of Sciences where he issued a challenge to resurrect a passion for education in America that the founding fathers sowed (Murphy, 2005). Following *A Nation At Risk* publication, the term *at risk* became associated with students in the K-12 population.

*At-risk students* are youths in danger of not graduating from high school (Riele, 2006). At-risk students may not graduate for a number of different reasons. Among the factors that may contribute to a student becoming at-risk are (a) falling behind his or her peers more than two grades, (b) involvement in illegal activity, (c) boredom with the high school routine, (d) lack of family support, and (e) feeling they are not a part of the school environment (Riele, 2006).

The “*school-to-prison pipeline*” (Brownstein, 2010) is the concept that harsh zero-tolerance discipline practices tend to push young people, usually at-risk students, out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Weissman, 2009).

### **Summary**

Harsh zero-tolerance policies tend to “push-out” students through exclusionary discipline practices like suspension and expulsion from school, consequences considered by many to be too severe for relatively minor infractions. These policies have dramatically increased the number of

suspensions and expulsions in the last decade, increasing the likelihood that a student will drop out and become involved with the juvenile justice system—a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Brownstein, 2010). Despite the increased number of suspensions and expulsions, perceptions of how safe schools are have remained relatively unchanged. Zero tolerance appears to be a failed approach, and legislators are calling for investigation into discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from school.

This study was divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 included background and a statement of the problem as well as the purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, significance, assumptions, and definitions. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the origin and effects of zero-tolerance policies and practices, and Chapter 3 details the methodology of the study. In Chapter 4 the findings are reported, and Chapter 5 includes the conclusions and recommendations.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

The review of literature explains zero tolerance and the factors that surround zero-tolerance policies. It discusses the explosion in the number of alternative schools, describes the typical alternative school and the typical alternative school student. Finally, the review of literature reports why zero-tolerance policies are criticized, and how legislators are currently responding to the problems created by zero-tolerance policies.

#### **What is Zero-Tolerance?**

Zero tolerance has its roots in the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act, written by legislators in response to public concern about the seemingly overwhelming increase in school violence during the 1990s. Media frenzy at this time period focused on school violence; this in turn focused public awareness on school safety and pressured legislators to take steps to produce gun-free schools. The intent of the Act was to impact specific problems with school safety and discipline; it accomplished this by making Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) funds contingent upon a state's enactment of zero-tolerance laws. The Act made federal school funding dollars contingent upon the local adoption of strict school discipline policies that mandated expulsion for weapons possession (Martin, 2000), and all 50 states adopted some variation of the law.

Some school administrators interpret the Act in a much broader sense than legislators intended, treating both minor and major incidents with equal severity using the excuse of

“mandated zero-tolerance” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). While the federal law requires a one-year expulsion only for possession of a weapon, some administrators go beyond the legislators’ intent of the Act by extending zero tolerance to other infractions in an effort to standardize and simplify discipline (McAndrews, 2001). Over time, many jurisdictions came to apply mandatory expulsion policies to other behaviors including drug possession, fighting, and even lesser “offenses” such as swearing (Skiba & Knesting 2001).

*A Nation at Risk*, published in 1983, continues to be viewed as the foundation for the current “back-to-basics” and “tougher-standards” movements, both fueled by political demands on schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education). This publication included President Reagan’s message to the National Academy of Sciences where he issued a challenge to resurrect a passion for education in America that the founding fathers sowed (Murphy, 2005). Following *A Nation At Risk* publication, the term *at-risk* became associated with students in the K-12 population. As part of the effort to reform schools, *A Nation at Risk* triggered new challenges for schools such as: (a) standardized test results, (b) attendance rates, (c) dropout rates, (d) student pregnancies, (e) mobility, (f) cultural diversity, and (g) growing concern about school safety and student violence.

School discipline runs the gamut from teacher admonitions in classrooms and teacher contacts with parents to more formal school procedures including suspensions and expulsions. Suspensions can be in-school (ISS) or out-of-school (OSS). ISS suspensions typically involve placement in a specialized, segregated setting within the mainstream school for a specified and relatively short period of time that may range from a school day to several school days. OSS suspensions can be also short-term (e.g., three to five days), after which the student returns to his or her school. However, OSS suspensions may be long-term, sometimes involving placement in an alternative school or other educational setting. Long-term OSS and expulsions are often considered one and the same, although there are differences in how states implement these actions. New York State, for example, does not permanently exclude students; the State’s

response to the zero-tolerance mandates in federal law was to set up alternative education settings that were called “programs” rather than schools (Weissman, 2009). In Pennsylvania, students who are expelled and their parents are given 30 days to enroll in another school district. If they are unable to do so, the expelling district is obligated to establish some form of education service for the student. The type of program is at the discretion of the district (Weissman, 2009).

### **What are the Factors that Surround Zero-Tolerance Policies?**

Weissman (2009) reported that administrators, during the student reassignment process, often appear to play a game informally referred to as “Hot Potato,” as principals often try to push off students to another school rather than readmit them. Problems arise because most academic programs, including vocational programs, are reluctant to accept re-entering youth in the middle of the program (Feierman, Levick, & Mody, 2009). As a result, schools may encourage youth to drop out or enroll in alternative education programs.

The subsequent explosion in the number of alternative schools created to deal with the dramatically increasing numbers of suspended and expelled students is perhaps the most observable effect of zero-tolerance discipline policies. Between 1993 and 1994, the United States established 2,606 alternative schools, a 47% increase in the number of alternative schools from the previous year (Foley & Pang, 2006). By 2001, the National Center on Educational Statistics reported 10,900 alternative public schools and programs catering to students in the United States (Foley & Pang, 2006), while five years later Quinn (2006) reported the number of U.S. alternative programs to be estimated at about 20,000. In Oklahoma, the Statewide Alternative Education Academy Program was launched in 1996 to provide permanent funding for alternative education, and in the short span of two years the current level of 250 academy programs was reached (Oklahoma Statewide Alternative Academy Program Fact Sheet, 1/19/2010, retrieved from <http://otac.info>).

## **What is an Alternative Education School?**

Early alternative education schools appeared so successful that alternative schools were adopted to serve all sorts of purposes, including as an answer to juvenile crime and delinquency, a means of preventing school vandalism and violence, a means of dropout prevention, as well as a means of heightening school effectiveness (Raywid, 1998). Some alternative schools were designed to attract students with unique talents, while other alternative schools focused on drug rehabilitation and counseling. More recently, alternative education high schools have been perceived as simply programs for youth who are too disruptive to remain in traditional schools (Foley & Pang, 2006).

An alternative education high school is defined as a school designed to educate youth identified as being at-risk for school failure (Foley, 2006). In 2002 the U.S. Department of Education defined an alternative education school as a “public elementary or secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p.55). However, Quinn (2006) claimed the field of alternative education lacks a common definition and suffers a major divide in philosophies of alternative programs. Similarly, Van Acker (2007) asserted “alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur” (p. 6). Simply put, alternative education means different things to different people.

### **Characteristics of a Typical Alternative Education Program**

Foley and Pang (2006), in a report on alternative school characteristics, found alternative education programs primarily serve adolescents within the age range of 12 to 21 years, and that 80% of alternative education programs operate in off-campus facilities. Over three-fourths operate using a site-based management structure, and over 80% of programs are on closed

campus (students are not allowed to leave and return during the school day). The average population of a campus is 90 students; approximately 50% of alternative education students are identified as emotional and behavior disordered, and 10% were identified as learning disabled (Foley & Pang, 2006).

Raywid (1994) separated alternative education programs into three types which are still commonly referenced today. A Type I program refers to schools of choice, such as a magnet school, which have a content theme and—as the term “magnet” implies—attract a certain type of student. Type III programs emphasize rehabilitation and remediation. The goal at these programs is to provide counseling and remediation with the purpose of the student returning to the traditional school.

The most recent evolution of alternative schools, and the one most applicable to this research study, is the Type II alternative school, created to meet the demands of “students who are chronically disruptive, suspended, expelled, or that the administrators said lacked effort or who needed a change of attitude” (Loflin, 2000, p. 11). These programs are for students who have been identified as too disruptive for the traditional educational setting, and students are typically sent to these “last chance” schools (p. 11) as a last step before expulsion or detention. In many districts, the school board determines the placement of students in the Type II environment. Often students do not graduate, and may find themselves dropping out, earning a General Education Diploma (GED), or attending adult education programs (Reeder, 2005).

Researchers agree about many program elements deemed essential for effective alternative programs (Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Powell, 2003): a low teacher/pupil ratio; a climate that supports learning; a flexible structure that accommodates students’ needs; high expectations for students; a location of the school away from other high schools and in neutral territory; an individualized curriculum; regular goal setting; daily follow-up on absences and tardies; an extrinsic reward system for attendance and academic achievement; and an enrollment system wherein students must apply for acceptance into the school.

The field of alternative education is still quite new, and as a result, the body of knowledge in this area is relatively small. Experts cannot reach a consensus on a definition of exactly what alternative education is. Van Acker (2007) summed it up when he wrote “alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program” (p. 6). Each state, and indeed each school district, seems to have its own mission of who they intend to educate and how they intend to educate them.

### **Description of the Typical Alternative Education Student**

Saunders and Saunders (2001-2002) found youth attending alternative schools have reported they were placed in an alternative school most often for absenteeism (57%), low academic performance (47%), suspensions and expulsions (36%), and classroom behavior problems (27%). D’Angelo and Zemanick (2009) verified these perceptions with their study of an alternative school in which the students had issues with truancy, were consistently suspended, had repeated the same grade several times, or were returning from an outside placement agency such as juvenile detention. Aron (2006) identified challenges alternative education students face such as falling “off-track” because they had gotten into trouble; prematurely transitioning into adulthood either because they are (or are about to become) parents; having home situations that do not allow them to attend school regularly; and coming out of the juvenile justice system, which places its own demands on their time and also does not allow them to attend school regularly.

Researchers agree that alternative education students often lack a support system at home. For example, Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik, & Kreil (2001), suggested in their research that alternative school youth perceive their parents as not supportive or involved in their activities. Dugger and Dugger (1998) described at-risk students as extrinsically rather than intrinsically motivated, and found that providing rewards and incentives for doing well improved both attendance and test scores. Carswell (2009) noticed that positive behavior and homework completion increased when students were offered an additional nutritious snack as a reward.

Students' self-esteem also plays a part in alternative school academic achievement. De La Ossa (2005) studied alternative students' perceptions of traditional high school education. Students reported the pace was too fast; they never had time to finish their work; there were too many distractions; and they received little attention as evidenced by one student claiming, "I could sleep in class and never be noticed." (p. 26). Dugger and Dugger (1998) reported the typical alternative education student has low self-esteem, and they referred to research that relates low self-esteem to low academic achievement. Carswell (2009) found that monthly parent meetings in which poetry readings, art displays, skits, and dances highlighted the unique talents of the students raised their self-esteem and served as a motivator for students.

### **Why Are Zero-Tolerance Policies Criticized?**

Critics claim the implementation of zero-tolerance type school discipline has created a "school-to-prison pipeline" (Brownstein, 2010). School discipline has come to resemble criminal justice strategies of arrest, trial, sentence and exclusion to stigmatizing institutions such as alternative education schools. Critics reason that these exclusions from mainstream education result in increased numbers of dropouts, terminating in the eventual imprisonment of most dropouts.

There is evidence to back this line of reasoning. Zero-tolerance policies of harsh school discipline are imposed on young people for relatively minor infractions of school policy. Instead of making schools safer, these zero tolerance policies are simply causing students to be suspended, expelled, and referred to alternative education sites or juvenile justice agencies in dramatically increasing numbers (Brownstein, 2010). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights data on school suspensions and expulsions show that between 1974 and 2000, the rate at which America's students were suspended and expelled from schools almost doubled from 3.7 percent of students in 1974 (1.7 million students suspended) to 6.6 percent of students in 2000 (3 million students suspended) (Wald & Losen, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education estimates that over 100,000 students were expelled and 3,300,000 students were suspended at

least once in the 2005-06 school year. This represents an 8% increase in suspensions and a 15% increase in expulsions since the 2001-02 school year (Brownstein, 2010). These exclusionary discipline policies serve as push effects that move kids closer to the school door. Students who were suspended or expelled, the researchers found, became convinced that teachers and administrators no longer wanted them in their schools. Predictably, perhaps, these students became more disruptive, were chronically absent, and gave up trying to pass their courses, which led to their eventual exclusion from mainstream school.

Research by Skiba and Peterson (1999) linked early school suspensions and expulsions to dropout rates. The National Center for Educational Statistics shows that 31 percent of students who had been suspended three or more times before the spring of their sophomore year dropped out of school compared to 6 percent of students who had never been suspended (Livingston, 2006). Additionally, while not all dropouts wind up in prison, Western's (2006) empirical work found the lack of education to have the most profound impact on the likelihood of incarceration, with high school dropouts five times more likely than high school graduates to go to prison (Weissman, 2009). This evidence creates a convincing argument for critic's claims that zero-tolerance policies have created a "school-to-prison pipeline" (Brownstein, 2010): the harsh application of zero-tolerance policies has increased the number of suspensions and expulsions; suspension increases the likelihood of students dropping out of school; and young people who drop out of school are very likely to wind up in prison.

Another criticism of zero-tolerance discipline policies is the tendency of administrators to criminalize student behavior. Student misbehavior is increasingly labeled as criminal and then subject to law enforcement authority. Behaviors considered obnoxious but typical of adolescent males—such as snapping bras or slapping butts—is now criminalized, labeled "offensive touching," reported to the police, and processed in the formal court system (Weissman, 2009). Another example, in many school districts, is fighting among students is no longer termed "fighting" but rather "assault," a term that carries with it law enforcement connotations. The



arms, hands and feet involved in the playground pushes, shoves, slaps, punches, scratches and kicks are now defined as “personal weapons” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006).

Critics of zero-tolerance contend that schools remain remarkably safe places: FBI (2006) data show that only 3.3 percent of the more than 17 million criminal incidents reported to the National Institute-Based Reporting System between 2000-2004 involved incidents that took place at schools. Moreover, the majority of incidents involved students who knew each other, and most - 62 percent - did not involve violence of any sort. Where the incident was classified as violent, the data show that the violence was perpetrated not by guns or knives, but so-called “personal weapons,” which were in fact arms, legs, feet and hands.

Critics also maintain that zero-tolerance policies affect the overall school culture and the ways that teachers manage classrooms and schools (Devine 1996). Reliance on punitive zero-tolerance discipline practices thwarts teacher and administrative creativity in developing more constructive and nurturing ways of dealing with behavior issues and classroom conflict (Adam, 2000; Atkins et al., 2002). Its exclusionary practices increase the isolation from pro-social institutions and opportunities for the very youth who may be most in need of such interactions. The young people are not only exiled from their regular school and friends, but from their sports teams and other extracurricular activities as well. This sort of discipline is sometimes referred to as a type of “moral exclusion,” a worldview that justifies “disparate access to opportunity and resources” (Fallis & Opatow, 2003, p. 112).

Exclusionary discipline policies operate under the assumption that removing disruptive students makes a school safer, when in fact research by the American Psychological Association shows the opposite. Schools with higher rates of suspension and expulsion spend more time on discipline matters, and score lower on school climate and satisfaction with school governance surveys (American Psychological Association, 2006). The APA confirmed that zero tolerance methods negatively affect student achievement. In fact, a study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that zero-tolerance policies had little effect at previously unsafe

schools; the center also reported that the data did not demonstrate a dramatic decrease in school-based violence (Ashford, 2000).

### **Current Legislative Response to Zero-Tolerance Policies**

On July 21, 2011, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder announced a joint effort to respond to the school-to-prison pipeline by “supporting good discipline practices” (U. S. Department of Justice, 2011). Secretary of Education Duncan and Attorney General Holder announced the launch of the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, a “collaborative project between the Departments of Justice and Education that will address the school-to-prison pipeline and the discipline policies and practices that can push students out of school and into the justice system” (U. S. Department of Justice). The initiative aims to support good discipline practices to foster safe and productive learning environments in every classroom.

‘Ensuring that our educational system is a doorway to opportunity – and not a point of entry to our criminal justice system – is a critical, and achievable, goal,’ said Attorney General Holder. ‘By bringing together government, law enforcement, academic, and community leaders, I’m confident that we can make certain that school discipline policies are enforced fairly and do not become obstacles to future growth, progress, and achievement.’ (U. S. Department of Justice, 2011)

As presented by the Office of Public Affairs of the Department of Justice,

The goals of the Supportive School Discipline Initiative are to: 1) build consensus for action among federal, state and local education and justice stakeholders; 2) collaborate on research and data collection that may be needed to inform this work, such as evaluations of alternative discipline policies and interventions; 3) develop guidance to ensure that school discipline policies and practices comply with the nation’s civil rights laws and to promote positive discipline options to both keep kids in school and improve the climate for learning; and 4) promote awareness and knowledge about evidence-based and

promising policies and practices among state judicial and education leadership (U. S. Department of Justice).

### **Summary**

This review of the literature illustrates that zero-tolerance policies are discipline approaches enacted as a response to public concern in the early 1990s about safety in schools. This concern caused legislators to create the Gun-Free Schools Act, which tied federal funding to the adoption of zero-tolerance discipline policies. Critics claim these zero-tolerance policies have increased student suspensions and expulsions, caused an explosion in the number of alternative schools, and increased the chance that students will drop out of school and wind up in prison—a phenomenon described as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Brownstein, 2010).

Critics also claim zero-tolerance unnecessarily criminalizes student misbehavior, and that schools remain remarkably safe, before and after the implementation of zero-tolerance policies. Legislators are calling for research into ways of counteracting the negative effects of zero-tolerance policies. Chapter 3 presents the methodology for the study; Chapter 4 reports the research findings; and Chapter 5 includes the conclusions and recommendations.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

While the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act required a one-year expulsion for possession of a weapon, many school districts applied harsh, mandatory expulsion consequences for lesser offenses such as tardiness, truancy, fighting, swearing, possession of legal medications, and catch-all categories like “disrespect” (Sweeten, 2006, Skiba and Knesting 2001). These exclusionary discipline practices increased the chance that a student would drop out, and dropouts are five times more likely to go to prison than high school graduates (Weissman, 2009). These “push-out” policies quietly encouraged marginal students to drop out of school and into the juvenile justice system, in what came to be known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Brownstein, 2010).

The ever-increasing number of suspensions and expulsions has not proven to significantly improve school safety. School administrators, therefore, need alternatives to exclusionary school discipline practices. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, and to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting.

#### **Procedure**

Yin (2003) stated the case study is “the preferred research strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are posed, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a

contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 1). This was appropriate for this study because while I had a great deal of control over the discipline strategies used in my classroom, I had little or no control over discipline administered in the district. The unexpected effect of applying zero tolerance discipline policies qualified this research as a study of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life education context.

A case study is used to explain reasons for a problem and give better understanding of bounded situations. Creswell (2007) described case study research as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a *case description* and case-based themes” (p. 73). The intent of this study was to explain reasons for and give a better understanding of the problems caused by the application of zero-tolerance discipline practices. I collected data about alternative, non-exclusionary, methods of discipline through the use of observation, informal and conversational interviews, quotations from formal interviews, follow up telephone interviews, email communication, and excerpts from literature that participants suggested be read to better understand the problem.

Qualitative case studies are distinguished in many ways. According to Creswell (2007), case studies may be distinguished in terms of the intent of the case analysis. From this perspective, there are three variations with respect to intent: the single instrumental case study, the collective or multiple case study, and the intrinsic case study. In a single instrumental case study, Stake (1995) states the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue. In a collective or multiple case study, one issue or concern is again selected, but the researcher might select several programs from several different sites in an effort to illustrate the issue. In the intrinsic case study, the focus is on the case itself, which often is of unusual or unique nature (e.g., evaluating a program, or studying a student having difficulty—see Stake, 1995). This study was a multiple case study that showed multiple

perspectives on the same issue of the factors surrounding zero-tolerance discipline and the search for non-exclusionary discipline practices. Though Creswell (2007) claims qualitative researchers are usually reluctant to generalize from one case to another because the context of cases differ, Yin (2003) suggests that generalization may be possible if the researcher uses the logic of replication—e.g., the researcher replicates the procedures for each case. By replicating this study at three different sites and analyzing these multiple perspectives of this case I hoped to discover and collect successfully used non-exclusionary discipline practices that could reliably be generalized to other high school populations.

### **Participants**

I utilized “purposeful maximal sampling” (Creswell, 2007, p. 75) to select participants who would show different perspectives on the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices. The participants in this study were a principal, two teachers, and two to four students from each of three Midwestern alternative schools. These sites had been identified as outstanding alternative schools by receiving the annual Outstanding Achievement in Alternative Education Award from their state’s Foundation for Excellence. These schools were given the pseudonyms Truman Alternative Academy, Cleveland Alternative Academy, and Adams Alternative Academy. These schools were chosen because they had been recognized for excellence in serving students who had been suspended, expelled, or otherwise excluded from mainstream schools. The principals, staff, and students at these schools were involved daily with the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, and were well suited to help identify discipline alternatives that did not remove or exclude students from the school setting.

### **Instrumentation**

Interview questions were designed to address the following research questions:

1. What are alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround current zero-tolerance discipline approaches?

2. What are discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting?

The interview questions guided the study toward saturation. Saturation occurs when no new information is uncovered through the interview process and responses become increasingly repetitious (Richards, 2005). Probing questions—not provided to the participants—were used to elicit additional details and richer responses. The researcher acted “as a catalyst to stimulate pertinent information during the interview process” (Maxwell, 2005). The purpose of the interview questions was to elicit participant responses that would provide data leading to answers to the research questions. The researcher, as part of the instrumentation, used the interview questions to provoke discussion and gain an understanding of the position and thoughts of the participants in order to address the research questions.

#### **Data Collection Procedures**

After this research proposal was approved by my committee, I applied for approval to conduct the research through the Institutional Review Board of Oklahoma State University. Following this approval, I called the superintendents of the participating schools and communicated the purpose and procedures of this study. I asked for verbal consent to interview the principals and selected staff and students at the school sites. After receiving this permission, I asked for contact information, requested that the superintendents give the principals a brief explanation of my study, and sent the schools a research package containing a summary of the research proposal, a copy of a participant information forms, and the interview questions. I then contacted the principals to arrange dates and times when I could come to the school for data collection, and to choose a location where I could conduct the interviews. While arranging dates and times, I asked the principal to recommend two teachers for the teacher interviews, as well as two to four students for the student interviews. I specifically asked the principal to recommend only students who had been involved in a zero-tolerance discipline incident, so that student responses to the interview questions were applicable to the research questions. I assigned

pseudonyms to participants as I collected data in the spring of school year 2011-2012, and transcription occurred concurrently.

I gathered data through formal interviews lasting 30 to 60 minutes each and conducted in a place of the participant's choosing. I gathered additional data through informal and conversational interviews, observation, follow up telephone interviews, and email communications. I also included in the data any artifacts that I collected, as well as excerpts from documents that participants suggested be read to better illustrate their perceptions.

The interviews consisted of ten questions, and were semi structured to leave opportunities for participants to expand on questions in ways relevant to their experiences and opinions. I digitally recorded each interview, and later transcribed the interview verbatim, except for replacing the participant's name with a pseudonym. I emailed each participant a transcript of the interview, and asked each participant to correct responses and clarify meaning. There was no extensive difference in the length of the interviews, which varied depending on the person. However, interviews lasted approximately 20 to 60 minutes. Data collection included emails and digitally-recorded telephone interviews with administrators, teachers, and students at each participant's convenience.

### **Data Analysis**

I entered written data from field notes and transcripts, separated by school, into the first column of a Microsoft Word table. I examined the data line by line, and used open coding to initially conceptualize recurring patterns and themes. When I found a section of data pertinent, I copied it to the second column of the table.

I formatted the fonts of this copied text in boldface if it originated from an administrator, in italics if it originated from an adult teacher or staff member, and left the typeface unaltered if it originated from a student. In column three of the table I entered the name of the school and the name of the person who provided the data. I then deleted column one and resized columns two and three so that each cell in the table was about two inches tall and seven inches wide (almost



the width of a sheet of paper). I printed out all these pertinent pieces of data, using a different color of paper for each school's data. In this way I could easily identify a piece of data's origin simply by looking at the color of the paper and the font of the type.

To analyze the data using axial coding, I cut up these "data strips", then shuffled and reorganized the data using axial coding to connect the identified themes to the research questions and conceptual framework. I first looked for emerging themes that included all three colors of paper and all three fonts—this pattern marked a theme or idea that was shared by all three schools and all participants at the schools. I then grouped the remaining themes, paying attention to the variety of participants and schools involved.

### **Trustworthiness**

Some qualitative researchers reject quantitative researchers' use of the framework of internal/external validity, reliability, and objectivity to show a study's trustworthiness (Web Center for Social Research, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria that they felt were better suited for judging the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Qualitative researchers prefer to use these four criteria as improved standards for judging the worth of qualitative research.

Credibility involves establishing that the results of a qualitative study are believable from the perspective of the participant. I showed the credibility of this study through the use of member checks to verify that participant's perceptions matched up with my portrayal of them. I sent participants copies of the transcript and asked for clarifications, additions, or deletions to the data.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of the study can be generalized, or transferred, to other settings. The results from this study could not necessarily be generalized to all alternative schools in Oklahoma, because each of the currently 250 alternative academy programs in Oklahoma (Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center, 2010) operate in the location and particular manner their Board of Education dictates. However, to address transferability, I

asked the administrators of the three alternative schools involved in this study to scrutinize the results of the investigation. These principals possessed many years of experience in education, and offered their perspectives on how the information could benefit their program, and possibly other alternative schools in the state.

Dependability involves giving the reader enough information to determine how dependable the study and the researcher are. Lincoln and Guba (1985) advised researchers to use detailed, accurate, and adequate documentation of changes, surprise occurrences, and the like, in the phenomena being studied. A study may be deemed dependable if another researcher can follow the clearly documented trail of the investigator and potentially arrive at the same or similar conclusions. I showed the dependability of this study through many discussions with my colleague, who is not only a teacher but also a fellow qualitative researcher and doctoral candidate. We had frequent conversations about my data and findings, and the conclusions she drew were similar to my own.

Confirmability, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is synonymous with objectivity. It is concerned with establishing that findings were clearly and without bias derived from the data. I showed confirmability in this study by asking another researcher to code an interview and checking for consistency among our results. I found no inconsistencies.

### **Data Storage**

Digital recordings and transcriptions will be stored for 3 years after the study in a locked steel file cabinet in my classroom, and then destroyed. Pseudonyms were used for this study, and the pseudonym identification sheet was stored in locked cabinet separate from the digital recordings and transcriptions. After I completed all data collection and contact with the participants was no longer necessary, I destroyed the pseudonym identification sheet. I am the only person with access to this locked cabinet; however, my advisor and research personnel at Oklahoma State University will be given access to the information in these records if needed.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research project and what would be done with the information collected during the project. The subject of this research was not a sensitive topic, so was not expected that participants would feel at risk, but participants were still assured of anonymity. Participants were reminded that if they found a topic sensitive in nature, they did not have to answer the relative questions. Field notes and transcripts did not contain personal identifiers, and participants were sent copies of all raw data for member checks. No questions required participants to mention a school employee or a specific incident in the home or at school. The participants were encouraged to share their opinions, with honesty and lucidity, connected to their school's application of zero-tolerance discipline procedures. Withdrawal from the interview process was an available option without penalty. No penalty existed for administrators, teachers, and students who did not wish to participate in the study and no explanation for refusal to participate was required.

Before the data collection began, participants received a participant information form that informed them participation in the interview was considered consent. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. All collected data remained confidential. Another researcher coded the data for confirmability, but the data provided to the researcher already contained pseudonyms for the participants in order to maintain confidentiality.

## **Support and Permissions Necessary**

This study required the approval of the Institutional Review Board of Oklahoma State University. Consent was also needed from the superintendent and principal of the participating schools, as well as from the participants themselves. Student participants were over the age of 18, so parental consent was not needed.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I described the research procedure, the participants of the study, the method I used to select them, and the interview questions I plan to ask them. I clarified how I

collected and analyzed data, and explained validity concerns and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 will summarize and analyze all data that I gathered through the interview process.

## CHAPTER IV

### REPORT OF FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

The ever-increasing numbers of suspensions and expulsions caused by the application of zero-tolerance discipline practices have not proven to significantly improve school safety. School administrators, therefore, need alternatives to exclusionary school discipline practices. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, and to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting. The findings of this study may assist school administrators in creatively dealing with discipline issues using methods other than suspending and expelling students. School administrators may use this study to understand the perspectives of principals, teachers, and students concerning issues of discipline and how best to deal with it. In addition, this research study has the potential to improve student achievement by presenting school administrators with alternatives to inappropriate or excessive school discipline; alternatives that allow the disciplined students to continue academic progress without the physical and mental separation from their studies that suspensions and expulsions cause. Finally, results of the study will contribute to research about positive, non-exclusionary discipline interventions that have proven effective when used with the at-risk school population at alternative schools. This knowledge can then be transferred to mainstream school districts by sharing the information with administration and staff

in an effort to reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions handed down for relatively minor offenses.

This study was a multiple case study that showed multiple perspectives on the same issue of perceptions of factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline and the search for discipline alternatives. The participants in this study were a principal, two teachers, and two to four students from each of three Midwestern alternative schools that received their state's annual Outstanding Achievement award in Alternative Education Award. These schools were identified because they were recognized by their state's education foundation for excellence in serving students suspended, expelled, or otherwise excluded from mainstream schools. The principals, staff, and students at these schools were involved daily with zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, and were well suited to help identify discipline alternatives. There were a total of 19 interviews and 20 interviewees (the principal and a teacher at Adams Academy preferred a joint interview). All answered ten interview questions relating to the following two overarching research questions:

1. What are alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround current zero-tolerance discipline approaches?
2. What are discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting?

Chapter 4 is first organized chronologically by the school visited. These schools were given the pseudonyms Truman Alternative Academy, Cleveland Alternative Academy, and Adams Alternative Academy; all participants were given pseudonyms as well. Secondly, the interviews at each academy are arranged chronologically as they occurred during the day. Finally, each interviewee's responses are summarized and grouped according to the research question the responses addressed.

### **Truman Alternative Academy**

Truman Alternative Academy is a non-profit youth services facility located in a low

socioeconomic neighborhood of an urban Midwestern city of 603,000 people (U. S. Census Bureau). This city's population is 63% white, 16% African-American, 14% Hispanic, 6% Native American, and 1% other races. About 19% of the population lived below the poverty line, and the median income is \$39,289. Truman is housed in an old red brick former elementary school provided to Truman by the school district as part of the cooperative agreement between them. Truman had its beginnings in the 70s as a private youth services organization for at-risk youth, and was run by the local Presbyterian Church at a different location. Administrators in the following years secured an agreement with the public school district in which the school district accredited Truman's education program, provided a building, and paid for utilities, maintenance, school nutrition, two teachers and a security guard. Truman in the last year alone held several fundraisers and employed a fulltime grant writer to secure over \$400,000 in donations and grants in order to obtain the funds needed for the remaining teachers, therapeutic counselors, and any additional staff, activities, or services they wished to provide for their students. The staff repeatedly referred to Truman as a nonprofit "youth services organization," with education being one of the services they provided, as well as being staffed with a large counseling contingent to serve the population's drug and alcohol treatment needs.

The building sat about 20 steps from a major four-lane traffic artery, and was about 100 yards from a busy intersection where another 4 lane street crossed. All manner of cars and tractor-trailer rigs passed by, braked, accelerated, and honked. The school and grounds occupied the southeast corner of the intersection, while a gas station with bars on the windows, restaurants, and a small business inhabited the other three corners. Though the area was low socioeconomic, the visible businesses were clean, busy, and well-maintained. The exterior of the school building was a clean red brick, and the old windows were still well maintained. The small patches of lawn were nicely manicured and young trees and new flowerbeds were evident all around the school.

Although the outside of the school was loud and distracting, the interior was relatively quiet after I entered two sets of double doors. All students and visitors enter through these side

doors facing the busy street. I was immediately greeted by an imposing security guard, wand in hand, who scanned all the students for weapons and confiscated all open drinks. Since Truman provided a large contingent of five therapeutic counselors, the school is also considered a drug treatment center, and open drinks are forbidden because some students spike them with alcohol or other illegal substances.

The floor was tiled in ancient green and white square tiles—the tiles so old that replacements were no longer available—but they had been buffed and polished to a high sheen, a shining symbol of how well this long-standing building has been preserved. The walls seemed freshly painted in tan and white backgrounds while brightly colored murals and life sized self-portraits adorned the walls and lockers, courtesy of the art class students.

My guide for the day, Kayla, held the newly created position of Community Relations Director, and had arranged to be my tour guide and facilitator for the entire day. She met me at the entrance at the appointed hour and gave me an extensive tour of the facilities, including wandering in and out of classes unannounced. Community interest in Truman Academy was high, and as a result Kayla gave tours almost daily. The students and teachers were used to these unexpected interruptions, and though not always enthusiastic (it was a little early for them), they were good-natured and congenial, and seemed to like Kayla. She walked briskly, talked quickly, and had a detailed agenda for me, so before I knew it I was introduced to my first interview of the day, Tony.

### **Tony, Truman Academy student**

I heard Tony before I saw him. He was holding forth on some issue, and I could hear him from the hallway. A nice-looking kid, Tony was 19 years old, about 5 foot 10, 150 pounds, with thick dark eyebrows and black hair that had recently been given a crew cut. Though his heritage was not immediately apparent, he appeared to be of Italian descent. He was confident, relaxed, and well spoken. He was polite and surprisingly eloquent, and confidently yet slowly answered requests with “Yes, Sir,” or “No, Ma'am.” Tony had a history of violence, in the past having



been in an altercation with another student resulting in that student being in the hospital for about a month. Tony had also been suspended for smoking marijuana when he was a freshman and eventually was sent to a boot camp just south of British Columbia. He described it as living in the middle of nowhere, off the grid, in a kind of military kind of environment. We sat on a bench in the deserted hallway, accompanied by Kayla, who sat on the floor and occasionally interjected questions.

Tony's description of the school highlighted the comfort of an uncrowded school, commenting that "here we're such a comfortable and family environment." He went on to describe:

Everybody here has their own flaw and their own weakness and I think a lot of it is everybody here is too many kids and one damn class and I think that for all of our widespread issues we all come together as one in smaller classes and we learn a lot better that way. We're all here because we want to be here, we want to get done, and we've hit a speed bump in our life we were trying to get over it.

Tony again referenced the difference the size of the school makes. He complained that in his other school he remembered there being only "one counseling office in the freshman Academy, for 3000 students one counselor." He claimed it was better at the alternative school because there are fewer people to watch, and because the alternative school had really set in stone the rule of no fighting. He described the discipline process and the overworked administrators at a large school:

Working at a school with 4000 kids, the stress and the numbers, I would say if I went in to your office today at J for a fight I'd be like, you know, look man, I'm expelled, no question. If you deal with this every day, you know what I'm saying, you would have no sympathy for me. There wouldn't be any rapport here. I would not do that here because there is a happy medium. I think when I was at J the discipline process was a must, just because of the number of kids and they didn't have time to deal with it because they

literally were dealing with the next situation because that's how it was that J you are literally, when you go into the office you get six or 10 people in line waiting to see principal D. So you're like your kind of like, I'm screwed, there's 4000 kids here. He's not going to come in with a happy medium for me – he's tired of dealing with the same thing for the past 10 months.

Tony thought zero-tolerance discipline was appropriate when used for weapons, drugs, and threats of physical or mental injury. He voiced dissatisfaction about how fights were currently handled under zero-tolerance discipline and did not agree punishing both participants equally.

I think whoever was in self-defense part of the scenario and have proof of that with whatever's around, with people or cameras, I think they should definitely get the lower end of the sentencing as opposed to having an equal consequence.

Tony believed in house detention effectively deterred students from repeating the behavior, lamenting that “I hated that, I would've rather been suspended than sit in a cubicle all day. I remember those days. I hated eating the cheese sandwich and just working every day.”

Tony cautioned that out of school suspension negatively affected his attitude toward school, sharing, "It made me more angry and made me feel more tough it made me feel like more of a bad ass. And then you know when I got older I got into worse trouble." He believed that most people, when suspended, will learn their lesson and turn their act around. However, he cautioned that many students where the suspension like a badge of honor, and brag about how many people they fought and how many times they've been suspended.

Tony opposed the use of zero-tolerance discipline for so many infractions, and recommended a “medium” level of punishment as an alternative to suspending or expelling. He described a time when he cursed as a child, and his father made him sit down and write 400 times, and then put the piece of paper on the refrigerator for the whole family can see it. Tony remembered that incident from his childhood, and felt it left a lasting impact on him. Tony

advised “using more of an academic approach when it comes to discipline, like writing. I mean talking about what you did and why you're not gonna do it again.”

Tony also appreciated the fact that there were five counselors were 90 kids in the school, and identified the need for more therapeutic counselors in mainstream schools. He went on to say:

Five counselors for 90 kids for some people here that's their mom and dad that's their meal ticket that's their comfort zone that the only person they can talk to I definitely and completely support especially in the big schools need more counselors I think a lot more psychological problems can be met with more counselors in the public school system

Tony expressed the opinion that administrators need to look at each student's background on a case-by-case basis.

You gotta analyze the kids and really find out their problems. You never know, you could be dealing with somebody who has some problems upstairs and you know lesser consequences could be maybe needed for that person. By that I mean everybody's different, and you have to think of people situations and people's personalities and I don't want to say flaws, I just want to say they are who they are, can't change that.”

### **Nick, Truman Academy student**

Nick was a short student, dark hair cut in a buzz cut, about 5 foot six, 125 pounds, wearing a white T-shirt and jeans. Nick was tanned and in good physical condition. Nick spoke using the same streetwise jargon as Tony, but spoke in a softer tone and did not make much eye contact. He preferred to look at the floor, but occasionally glanced sideways to make eye contact when answering a question. He was very polite, and frequently used “Yes, sir” and “No, sir.” My guide Kayla pulled Nick out of class, and we walked a short distance down the hallway. Nick and I sat together on a short bench, while Kayla again sat on the floor.

Nick was very complementary about Truman Academy, asserting that it had totally changed his and his friend's lives. They got into trouble at the main high school for skipping school. They heard from a friend that Truman Academy was a great place, and convinced each

other to get back on track and try Truman Academy.

You know everyone's very different, and it's very easy to get along with kids here, I think, because one, the main reason is because it's such a small place and everyone kind of knows everyone—really comfortable you know. Yeah, it was just a little bump in my life, I'm just trying to get this done. I just told myself that there's gonna be more time for partying—better get this done.

Nick mentioned he had a tendency to misbehave at the larger school, feeling the large size of the school helped him remain unnoticed and anonymous. He said the school was just so big, with so many students:

The teachers in the classrooms could barely keep control over the students, they just talked and yelled. Here it's small and easy to focus, you know what I'm saying, you can actually get your stuff done, instead of just, let's leave, we're not doing nothing here.

Nick recalled an incident when he was suspended for 10 days for throwing a cap eraser at a teacher's head in school, complaining, "It was just a little bitty eraser and I thought that was a little bit harsh." Nick suggested a better way to deal with this would be to just sit down and talk. "I would probably just tell her I was just trying to be funny and show out but you know I'm sorry and I didn't mean it at all." Nick lamented the fact that he was never given the opportunity to talk it out and apologize, but instead was immediately suspended.

Nick noted that discipline was similar, for the most part, at both the large school and this alternative school. Nick felt the rules were the same at both schools, but here at Truman Academy the teachers and staff would not "put you into a place where you're gonna want to make a bad decision. You're not gonna want to be disciplined at all." One difference in discipline that Nick noted was that at Truman the student usually receives a warning for an infraction.

If you're caught doing something, they're going to warn you. They're going to talk to you about it, and find out why you did it, and what was your motivation to do it, and you know try to help you work with it. I left school early, you know, one time and you know

they gave me a warning, which is always good. You know, warnings are the best, instead of just, you know, first time you're done like you are saying the zero tolerance thing, you know. They give you a warning, let you know what you're doing wrong, what you need to do to fix it, so that's what I really like about the school.

Nick felt zero-tolerance discipline was appropriate if “what the kid did was really bad,” like bringing a gun or drugs to school. He disagreed, however, on using zero-tolerance discipline for fights. He noted that for fights at the mainstream high school a suspension of 10 to 15 days was usually handed down, which he felt was excessive. He suggested,

Take the two kids aside, you know, probably talk to them instead of just go home.

Because they can just go, you know, meet up again. You should try to get them aside and have them talk it out before you to send them both home...but if it's something real minor, like maybe a few days absent or anything like that really, then administrators should take the student aside and work with them as an individual.

Nick complained that “just sending them home, that's just not gonna help, because they got worse problems at their house. They're going to do even worse stuff at home.” Nick commented that the culture at home has a big impact on the student’s attitude about a suspension:

Well, when you suspend a kid they're going to be sitting at home dwelling on what they did, so they're going to come to school and probably not, you know, they probably weren't that disciplined at home, or, you know, it depends on the parents. If they weren't disciplined, you know, they could come back to school and do the exact same thing and what would the suspension mean? You know, nothing. They're just going to get suspended again, go home and do it all over again, and it will be like a cycle.

Nick, however, came from the other end of the spectrum. He felt devastated when he was suspended. “You know, I wasn't going back to (my old school) you know, there wasn't no other place for me, so I said, I gotta do what I gotta do.” He turned it around and chose to attend Truman Academy.

Nick reflected further on the factors surrounding suspension, making the statement that when suspended, a student feels that “they don't really care about me so they're not going to take the time out of their day to set me aside and ask me why am I doing this.” As a result, Nick suggested that suspended students act out even more upon return to school because they have no fear of being sent home again.

Nick's ideas for alternative methods of discipline centered around the need for sitting down one-on-one with a student and talking about their actions. Nick recommended always letting a student talk to a counselor before suspending them. For minor infractions like throwing objects, talking too much, or acting out, Nick proposed:

You should just take that kid, set them aside, and talk to them and say, look this is why what you're doing is wrong. Why are you doing that? Why are you doing this? What is your motivation to do this? And that will probably help the kid a lot to think to himself hey you know I need to stop doing this. Well, like I said, you know the best thing in my opinion is take them aside one-on-one. It might take you a long time because you have a lot of students and stuff, but it would be by far the best to take them, sit them down, and actually talk with them get to know their side, get to know their story, get to know why they're doing that and what their motive is.

**Laura, Truman Academy Executive Director**

Laura was a white female in her 50s, about 5'6" to 5'8" and of slender build. Her reddish-brown hair was curled and medium length, and she dressed professionally in a business suit and heels. She walked slowly and confidently, and though projecting a reserved business-like manner, she smiled frequently. Students walked into her room unannounced to chat or say good morning, and she smiled and talked easily with them, affecting the tone and attitude of an affectionate grandmother.

Laura spoke of Truman Academy as “not really a school,” but more of a youth services organization. Education was only one of their many functions. The Academy was a United Way

agency, and was considered a treatment agency as well, as evidenced by Truman's large contingent of 6 counselors who handle the therapeutic component for the approximately 100 students. Truman had developed a partnership with and was accredited by the main public school district, but since Truman was not a traditional public school, they did not subscribe to the traditional principal and assistant principal roles. Laura's title was Executive Director, a position whose responsibilities were similar in nature to a principal. Since Truman had multiple funding sources, a large part of Laura's job was keeping up with the mountains of paperwork that federal and state funding sources required.

A lot of people look over at Truman Academy and say, "Gosh. You're so lucky because you have all those counselors." And, it is like, if you want to put up with all these funding sources, you can have them. And you have to do the reapplications every year for them as well. That is why I think some of us just find it so difficult to deal with a lot of that stuff. But, like I said, for all the things where I feel like it is really helping to oversee and agencies are providing good services.

Laura identified Truman as a school that takes the kids who have nowhere else to go; "All the kids who have had the most trauma, the most domestic violence, the most abuse, then they are often the ones who have the most suspensions, the most problems in school, failing grades, those are the kids we take." She noted that many alternative schools worry about pre- and post-test grade scores that all alternative schools must send in to their state technical assistance center; as a result many alternative schools screen out the worst performing students so that their school scores look good to the state department. Laura emphasized that Truman "has always done the opposite because we are less concerned about that and more concerned about those kiddos that are out there floundering."

When questioned about the overall suspension and expulsion process, Laura was quick to state that administrators often use the excuse of zero-tolerance discipline to push problem students out the door. She regretted that schools were so willing to expel a student rather than

“take the time to figure out how they can help those kids.” She brought up that at Truman,

You’ll hear a lot of these kids talk about this feeling like adults didn’t care anything about them. They just felt like they were against them. So kids would feel like they had a reason to be rebellious because they didn’t have any parent that was caring or loving towards them. Just get in a classroom where they feel like somebody doesn’t care whether they are there or not. They are just going to start acting out.

Laura felt “all those behaviors start coming up to the surface that didn’t ever need to be there” because the large school does not have the time, or chooses not to take the time, to build the relationships and find out what is going on with these particular students.

Laura considered suspension and expulsion appropriate punishments if the safety of students was in question. She noted that Truman Academy had occasionally suspended students for fighting or threatening to fight, but was quick to point out the students always know they can reapply.

Yes, then they can come back, and we will talk to them about what they have done. They need to successfully complete a program, and we are going to contact the programs we referred them to or the programs. Where ever they might have gotten in and we will see how they did. Sometimes that might not even be something that would be applicable to what had happened. It might just be that they are going to come back and talk about how things will be different. What they have learned. So they come in and meet with the whole staff.

Overall, however, Laura was against most suspensions; “I think the schools need to figure out what they can do to accommodate the child.” She felt if students are suspended, but were told the school wants them back if they complete the treatment or tasks assigned to them, then simply by knowing they are wanted back the student would return with a whole different attitude.

When asked to compare discipline at the mainstream high schools to discipline at Truman



Academy, Laura again stressed building relationships as the key to preventing most discipline problems in the first place. Laura pointed out, “I think often in a mainstream high school they are dealing more with things after they happen, and we try to prevent them from happening.” She illustrated this by relating how at Truman, on the first day of each six week session the teachers and counselors spend the entire day on getting-to-know-you activities.

All the counselors go into the classrooms and for both the morning session and again after lunch for the afternoon session where they do different types of activities so the students will feel that sense of belonging and feel more comfortable with their classmates. Find that common ground that they have with each other. Feel like they do belong. Get to know the teachers because the teachers are involved in it—they are doing the activities as well. So you might, an example of one of those activities might be that everybody pairs off and each shares a one minute history. So you tell your partner a little bit about your life in one minute. Then you take turns and do it the other way and then you will share that with the rest of the group. So I will say, “This is James and I just found out that James blah blah blah” and I will give a little run down about him, and he would do the same with me. Then everybody in the group, as they are doing this, they will say, “Really! Oh you have a dog named so and so” or “You have . . .” or “I’m an only child too.” That type of thing, so that sharing and for some kids that come in here it has been kind of amazing what they have shared right off the bat. Like my mom is in prison, or I haven’t seen my Mom for four years because of that, or a student might share a sexual orientation just right away, and often feel comfortable enough with the group to do that. Everybody, once they get to start having where we are a family, that feeling, and just looking out for one another.

The counselors at Truman built relationships from Day 1. When enrolled, a student is assigned to a 15 minute first period homeroom period led a counselor. The student remained in this homeroom with this same counselor for their entire stay at Truman—another way in which

relationships are built and strengthened with students.

So if a student comes in and they have had a problem the night before, some trauma the night before, they can see their counselor right away. They can let their counselor know. So it is a good chance for their counselor to meet with them, eyeball them, see if they are really ready for class, give them that first contact, and then they also set goals for them. The students will have their notebook in homeroom, and different counselors do different things, but some will say, go around, “What are your goals you hope to achieve for today? What did you take away from yesterday?” Those types of things. Another one has a word she brings in every day and they talk about every day. What is that mean to you? Some have just little, mini activities they do with them as well. So homeroom is a quick thing but a real valuable time to set the tone for the day. I see that as a real valuable thing. Real important time.

Laura listed other things she asked the teachers to do to build relationships with the students, such as: greet students at the door, give them a big smile, make eye contact, let the student know you are happy to see them, and anything else that let students know the teachers and staff were here to do whatever they can to help the student. Laura strongly felt that building relationships is a preventative measure that stops most discipline problems before they start.

Laura’s first response to the idea of discipline alternatives was how important it is to look at the whole picture when dealing with students. She noted some of the things that occur as her staff pays attention to the individual student in an attempt to see the whole picture.

When you have staff that is welcoming them. When you have people that are sitting down with them and talking with them about what their interested in, first of all, if they are not doing real well and something is going on in the classroom, what the teachers will do is take the student out in the hallway and have a one-to-one conversation with them, “It seems like you are having an off day today. Is there something that came in that is bothering you today?” In those conversations outside in the hallway like that, almost

always the student is going to start talking about something that had happened that day and why they are not on board so much that day, but the main thing is that they have somebody looking at them that is listening to them that they know cares about them then they are going to be willing to do something for that person. Because they know that person is behind them and wants them to do well. As long as they know that they are surrounded by people who really want the best for them, it is just going to be a whole different kind of atmosphere.

Laura added to the idea of creating a welcoming and accepting atmosphere by describing the school culture of mutual respect they cultivate at Truman.

With one of our guiding principles being mutual respect, if somebody were to say something that someone else finds offensive, that is going to be brought up. “Remember about the mutual respect. What does that mean here?” One of the things I will say often is, “It’s not really Truman School-ish.” They will say that to one another. They will check each other. “This is not how we do things here.” Like we have some brand new kids here right now that yesterday was their first day. They are going to come into a place like this and they want to let everybody know [mimics deep voice], “Hey, you aren’t going to mess with me.” So one of the things we do in orientation before they even start here is let them know some of the things that may have worked for you in other schools aren’t really looked upon so kindly here. Like if you want to come in and talk about all the drugs you did and you got so crazy and all that, a lot of people here are trying not to use and a lot of people are—not only would they not be impressed with that—they are probably going to call you on it and they are probably going to tell you, “We don’t talk that way around here. It’s not Truman School-ish.”

Laura observed that an accepting culture of mutual respect was not present before she came here, and noted that it took a lot of work on the staff’s part to make this climate, or atmosphere, exist.

### **Paula, Truman Academy counselor**

Paula was a white female in her 30s. She was about 5'4" to 5'6", cheerful, friendly, very well-spoken, and giggled openly about topics she found humorous. She was casually dressed on this day, and preferred to meet in the teacher's lounge instead of her office. The lounge was large, as large as the largest classroom, and measured approximately 60 feet by 30 feet. Tables were scattered about the room, which was well lit both with fluorescent light as well as natural light coming in the bank of windows on one wall. The table we chose to sit at appeared to have been cleared in a hurry and still had crumbs and other remnants of lunch on it.

Paula thought most students heard about Truman Academy through word-of-mouth from other students who attended. She felt most students came here for no single reason, but for a combination of factors such as smaller class size, more individual attention, and because they fell behind in their work.

On the average, most of the kids who I do interviews with, do an intake with, their answers vary from the fact that they felt lost in a larger school. They didn't know who their counselor was, or they didn't know their teacher that well, or they felt really like they were overlooked in a classroom. So they became further and further behind and felt more anonymous. So their main reason for coming here is they have gotten behind in their student, they have lost their desire to even be in school, so they thought they would come here because they here there are only 13 students or small classroom size. That it's more of a smaller, one-on-one situation. So that's what I hear the most. They want that attention from their teachers and the support staff at Truman Academy.

Paula outlined the main difference between discipline at Truman Academy and the mainstream high school as being Truman's emphasis on individualization. Teachers and administrators looked at a student as an individual, and examined the student's behavior from all levels. Paula admitted that such an individualized approach results in differentiated consequences that are sometimes seem confusing and unfair to other students.

Where does that student live? What kind of parent's does that student have? What kind of background does that student have? What might precipitate that kind of behavior? So we look at individual students rather than black and white—okay, you did this so this results in this. Sometimes appears kind of hard for some of these students to understand or agree with because one kid can do this and their consequence could result in this and another kid could do virtually the same thing and the results would be different.

Sometimes the students have difficulties with it not being more black and white, but for us, we believe it needs to be approached on an individual basis. So I think the difference for us is that we are more individualized. And I think the regular public schools is more black and white.

Paula was not a traditionally certified school counselor and had not worked in other schools, but described a zero-tolerance incident she had heard about at the mainstream high school. A student went on vacation to the Bahamas with her family, and brought back tiny bottles of rum. “She thought it would be really cool to share this with her friends. So she brought it to school and distributed it amongst her friends, and so she got in trouble for having alcohol on the premises and distributing it.” The mainstream school applied zero-tolerance and expelled her for a whole year. Paula did not believe this, or non-attendance, was an appropriate use of zero-tolerance discipline, reserving zero-tolerance only for personal threats and physical violence.

I am concerned when a student is making threats toward another student or a staff person, a teacher, or a staff person in a school. I think those kinds of things, the student needs to be separated for a while. They need to be in-patient. They need some help. Drugs and alcohol, not so much. I think kids are going to, not all kids of course, but when they do experiment with it, I think it needs to be addressed on a truly individual basis.

Paula expressed concern that, in her opinion as a counselor who regularly speaks to students about their suspensions, few students are bothered by a suspension. Again she returned to the subject of individuality, and how suspension affects each student in a different way.

I have seen it run the gamut from shame and guilt to “Yeah, I did that.” When they returned to school, it is almost like, um, to a certain extent, it is almost like they were returning victors to a certain extent. It is like, “I was kicked out and now I’m back” kind of thing.

Paula discussed the issue of kids who are addicted to smoking and how smoking is not appropriate on campus. She complained about catching a kid smoking and then telling them, “You did that. You need to go home.” Paula lamented further, “What are you going to do? They are going to go home and smoke and veg in front of the TV so it would be better to keep them in the school. We don’t put kids out for bad decisions.” She offered no clear cut solution, but again stressed addressing the students as individuals.

Paula offered changing the culture of the school as an alternative means of discipline, in the form of teaching students to encourage other students to do the right thing. “For example, if somebody is putting someone down, we always encourage other students to recognize that and say, “That’s not the Truman Academy way. We don’t put kids down here.” Paula admitted that students found it corny at first to say something like this, but that eventually the idea caught on and, “strangely enough, over a period of time, we started hearing them say it: We don’t put people down here. We don’t put each other down here.”

### **Marcy, Truman Academy counselor**

Marcy was a white female in her 30s, 5’4” to 5’6”, medium length brown hair, with the soothing voice and actions of an experienced counselor. She met me at the door to her office, and led me to a 4 foot round table immediately inside the door, and closed the door behind me. Her office was long and narrow, approximately 8 feet wide and perhaps 30 feet deep, and was split into two rooms. The room I sat in was about 8 feet square and contained only this round table and three chairs. Visitors must pass through this small conference area to get to Marcy’s office, which appeared to have a window letting in some natural light.

Marcy described Truman Academy as a school for students who had dropped out or had

enrolled in the mainstream high school, but for whatever reason were unsuccessful. She clarified that Truman Academy does not take suspended students only because their contract with the school district that accredits them does not allow them to, noting “they have other things they want to do with their suspended kids instead of letting them come here.” Marcy reported that students chose Truman Academy for a variety of family and educational reasons:

We get a lot of our referrals through friends and parents that have attended, and now their kids are grown and they want them to attend here. Most of the kids that come here have large gaps in their education and have been behind before they started school because they just didn't get the opportunity for preschool or whatever the case may be. A lot of them come in with a history of addiction in their family, and parents whose priorities are other than those of education.

Marcy talked about several situations in which she thought students were suspended inappropriately. At some schools, the discipline policy required in-house suspension for not wearing the school uniform properly, or passing out gum, or playing with a Slinky in science class instead of patiently waiting for the experiment to begin. She elaborated on her son missing 6 days of science class for the above described Slinky incident over what she referred to as “ridiculous things because they're pulling you out of the classroom when you could be getting class instruction.” She was very candid about her disapproval of her son's discipline treatment, and went on to argue:

If the real focus of discipline is on trying to change behavior, and if the real focus of school is to try to educate, I don't think that that's the most effective way to achieve either one of those things. You know, he's a person you can just talk to and say, I would really appreciate it if you hadn't done that, so please don't do that; and he would have said, sorry I shouldn't have done it, and then it would've been over and done with.

Marcy attributed most discipline overreactions to a lack of common sense at the mainstream high schools. She was very concerned that nobody listens to a student's story or

investigates the circumstances surrounding an event at a larger school.

It's just you did this, and this is what line 3C says we have to do, and so this is what we're going to do whether or not it's really in your best interest. We're gonna do it because that's what our rules say we do for that infraction. You know, it just doesn't make sense to me. It's like common sense has flown out the window and the best interest of the kid, of the individual and the group, is being sacrificed to these rules that are just so hard and fast.

Marcy considered zero-tolerance discipline appropriate when a student was endangering themselves or others. "I think it's appropriate in those rare circumstances when a student is physically harming somebody, or threatening to harm somebody, so that person is so uncomfortable that they can't focus on their work." She reiterated that she would prefer to see each case handled individually, with consequences unique to the situation, "instead of there being a hard and fast, you know, there's a fight you're out for a whole year" kind of thing.

Marcy did not believe that suspending or expelling a student is what is best for the student, but instead is convenient for the administrator, because it "gets them out of your hair for awhile." She admitted suspension could be good for the student if they are doing something constructive with their time, like going to therapy; but then listed several disadvantages:

I think if they're just sitting at home watching TV or playing on the computer, then for them it might be just a welcome relief to not have to go to school. They might see it as a reward rather than a punishment, plus it's just that many days of lost instruction. Then they return to school and they're behind, and maybe they don't know what's going on. They can get discouraged and fall even further behind. I just think that unless there something in place that's gonna benefit that student while they're not in school then it's not very helpful.

Marcy elaborated upon her strategy for better discipline, preferring individual attention to standard rote procedure. She qualified her strategy as time-intensive, and admitted that perhaps



larger schools physically do not have the time to investigate individual situations.

I would rather—and that's what we do here—we sit down as a staff, and we discuss the situation, and we say what is in the best interest of this child? How can we best help this child given the situation? So I would like to see things handled on an individual basis. I know that that takes a lot more time and energy, and maybe that's what larger schools are trying to avoid is having to deal with things individually as they happen. It's a lot easier if you have when A happens then the outcome is B.

Marcy credited their counselors with stopping most discipline problems before they flare up. She detailed how students are told at intake that if they ever have a problem with a teacher or student that they cannot solve themselves, then they should let their counselor know. The counselor mediates while they interact with the student; “We all sit down together, and we talk about it and just get it worked out so that we can just put it behind us, move forward, and focus on what you're here for—to get your education.” She stressed the importance of mutual respect and communication, and sitting down like civilized human beings to work it out.

**Mark, Truman Academy teacher**

Mark was a tall white male in his 50s. He stood about 6'3", about 220-240 pounds, and had a fair complexion. His white hair was starting to recede, and he wore it medium length above the ear. He wore wire frame glasses, and although he smiled very little, he had a wry sense of humor and was very likeable. In a previous life Mark was on the school board and was a lawyer, and at the risk of stereotyping lawyers, he did enjoy holding forth on any subject and answering any question at length—which made for both a good teacher and a good interview. We met in his classroom, an extremely large room measuring about 30 feet by 80 feet. The room was furnished in two parts. One half of the room was a traditional classroom with tables, a whiteboard, and other classroom artifacts. The other half of the room had a huge three piece horseshoe-shaped leather couch ensemble, was carpeted, and had other comfortable chairs and tables scattered about. Mark explained that half of the room was for more unstructured activities, whereas the

classroom setting was for more traditional teacher-led lessons.

Mark designated Truman Academy as a school for kids who were at risk of dropping out altogether. Some kids he referred to as combative, others as students whose behaviors did not allow them to fit in at the mainstream high school. He also emphasized that Truman was a school of choice, and that students had to make the positive choice to come here.

This is not a mandatory school. Kids make a choice where they attend and I think that is one of the real keys to success here, because I can look at any particular student who is at the end of their rope and say, “Why are you here? There is a door right there and nobody is keeping you here except what is going on up here.” [points to head]. That is a powerful concept, and I have only had to raise that kind of conversation two or three times a year, but it is a powerful question. They don’t want to not be connected, so you build on that choice to be here.

Mark elaborated that Truman Academy is a private, non-profit corporation as well as a United Way agency. The Academy abides by a contract with the school district, in which the district accredits Truman Academy and provides some in-kind support.

I guess it is what you would call a charter school nowadays, but long before there ever was a charter school program. We have been very good and very positive working relationship with Central Public Schools. They provide the building and part of our staff and services like the internet, computers, and custodial support, and food. We raise the money for all the rest of what we choose to do.

Mark compared discipline between the mainstream high school and Truman by outlining how the discipline philosophy differs at Truman. He began by explaining the root of the word “discipline” actually means to learn or train, not to punish. Mark noted that in this smaller setting of Truman Academy, the staff as a whole tried to react to all student behaviors in a way that did not get face-to-face and angry and upset, and tried to handle each behavior incident in such a way that the student learned something from the experience. Mark acknowledged the role counseling

plays in these problem behaviors when they identify and address the needs that are usually at the root of the students' behavior.

We are not out to punish any of our students. We are out to manage that student's needs on that day. We presume every behavior that we see is kids coping as best they can with the traumas they are facing in their lives. We get all kinds, whether it is poverty, or abuse, or special education, or physical or mental needs. Their behaviors that are problematic in an educational setting are all connected with their ability to cope with that as best they can. So if I see behavior in the classroom that is anger, I am not taking that as something that is personal. I am taking that as somebody having a really crappy day because of something else that is going on in their life. So I think it is a mindset, each and every student, each and every day, is bringing their own plate of concerns and anxieties and what we can do best here in terms of discipline is to model ways of coping differently that kind of get the ends and the needs met without the negative effects. That is why we have the heavy dose of counseling here to talk about that.

Mark then illustrated discipline procedures in a mainstream school, referring to the problems inherent in managing large numbers of students. He suggested that teachers in a large school with large classes, when faced with a discipline matter, are "primarily interested in having that problem segregated so they focus on, you know, if they have 30 kids in their class, they've still got 29. So it becomes a management issue, and I can fully sympathize and understand that."

Mark was reluctant to declare that zero-tolerance discipline is appropriate for any particular situation; the closest he came was when he pointed out that if somebody was a physical threat to the community, "then...we need to address that very specifically." Still, he shied away from citing expulsion as an appropriate punishment for any act, explaining that "expulsion implies you are out the door—I don't really care what you do." Mark preferred an approach that tries to examine the root of the behavior. He favors having a staff discussion with the student and saying, for example, "I don't think we are meeting the needs you have to deal with this anger.

Let's try to put you in a placement that can help you." Matt further illustrated this idea by speaking about a student who had a significant drug problem at school. This student was kicked out of Truman, and the only way he could come back was to have a clear urine analysis (UA), complete a drug treatment program, and come in front of staff to request he be allowed to return.

Once again, it wasn't just "Go away." It was, "Here are some steps you need to take and if you are motivated enough and you want to come back." And again, this is another reinforcement of it, if this is a place you want to be we want you to be here and we want to meet the needs you have to be here. United is a great drug program and if you engage that, if you are able to demonstrate through clean UAs, then God bless you.

Mark appreciated that at Truman Academy "we deal with these issues as a staff. We talk them out together." He noted the students go home at 2:05 p.m. and the staff has almost an hour and a half each day to plan and meet and take care of daily business. The whole staff and full set of teachers use this time to meet twice a week to talk out what is best for a particular student's needs. Mark eloquently summarized the unique discipline challenges inherent in an alternative school when he reflected:

It is always this really challenging balance of having predictability and yet having some flexibility to meet individual needs and there is never a good answer. You always run the risk when you do that (being flexible with discipline) of having other students say, "Well, he gets away with it. Why don't I get to?"

Mark again stressed flexibility when describing what happens when a student tests positive on the UA during the random drug tests. He pointed out how each infraction is handled uniquely, with attention paid to what is best for each individual student's needs.

There's not a hard and fast rule. Again, it's a, what is the substance? What is the best way to meet the needs? Telling them, you can't have that here. It may be requiring them to be a student here, but have more frequent UA's. Referring them to outpatient clinics where they can attend school and participate in both. For some, if it is a condition of

their parole and they are on parole and they come back dirty, we have got to inform their parole officer. Again, each one is going to be an individualized case. It is not a “You tested positive. You are out of here.” We are going to try to get them the help to deal with that the best we can.

Mark believed a smaller school has fewer discipline problems because everybody knows everybody—“kids are not able to come in here and be, sort of, anonymous troublemakers.” He touched on mutual respect, and how building a relationship with a student encourages a student to “care enough about what I care about not to want to violate and respect those rules.” He cited that students in a small school get to know each other better and as a result “suspicions, hopefully, get broken down a little more.” Mark didn’t see the sense in large schools with thousands of students, lamenting “it becomes thousands of kids you will never get to know. What investment do you have in their well-being?”

When asked how suspension affects a student’s behavior or future, Mark credited suspension as useful when used as a cooling-off period. He noted a powerful tool often used at Truman Academy is asking a suspended student to come back before the staff so that they can all hear what the student is prepared to do if allowed to return.

So it is not just one student tells Mark, it won’t happen anymore, and then going down to Sam’s class and doing whatever the hell he wants to. If we all hear that the same, we can all evaluate, “Is this real contrition or is this a change in circumstances?” It is a judgment call, because we all know the student, and we were all there when they left, so their re-entry in those situation, I think, is a very positive step because once again, the students know that we all know we are starting on the same page.

The first thing Mark spoke of when asked about discipline alternatives was the idea of building a school culture around the idea of this being a school of choice; the idea that a student chose to be at this school, and

if you don’t want to be here, we’ll be happy to refer you to someplace else. Do you want

to be in school at all? If they don't, then I would say, frankly, that is your choice. Now what can we do to help you so that the ramifications of that are minimized? I wouldn't trade that one aspect of this school for anything else.

Matt continued and spoke to building a relationship that says "If you want to be here, God Bless You. We will help you. We will bend over backwards. We won't give up. We will try lots of different methods, but you've got to want to."

Matt's next idea involved changing the very system of education in a way that would make all schools a school of choice. His idea begins with his disagreement with mandatory attendance laws.

Our state constitution guarantees every student a free and appropriate education. I would like to guarantee that but not mandate that. If it were up to me, and I were waving a wand, I would do away with mandatory attendance at school. I think it should be a choice. Whenever I raise that question, everybody says, "It (education) is such a good thing. Everybody should have that." Well, if it is such a good thing, everybody will take advantage of it. Why are you requiring it? Why don't you have that little bit of leverage that if somebody needs to take a couple of years off or somebody needs to do something different, then go do it.

### **Cleveland Alternative Academy**

Cleveland Alternative Academy is located in a small suburban town of 15,753 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). The racial makeup of the city is 54% white, 30% Native American, 10% Hispanic, 2% African American, and 4% other. Thirty-two percent of the population is below the poverty line, and the median income level was \$25,478. The town is close to a river that during the summers is a popular destination for tourists who like to float the river and camp. The school is housed in a former elementary school complex, just down the hill about 400 yards from the main high school. The elementary complex is made up of six buildings. Three of the buildings are obviously much older and were constructed using the standard institutional red brick, but the

alternative school is housed in two of the three “newer” metal buildings built in the 1970s. These metal classroom buildings resemble the one story metal barns seen on farms. The yellow paint is a faded and flaking yellow, and only a small, red, one foot square sign announces the location of Central Academy’s administrative offices. The grassy areas were mowed, but I did not see any flowerbeds or new trees—the landscaping was minimal. I walked up the cracked, washed-out sidewalk, past a couple of old, lonely picnic tables, and searched for the entrance.

No one greeted me as I walked into the small lobby; in fact, no one was visible at all. I saw a couple classroom doors on the left, and on the right appeared to be restrooms and an office. Nothing was labeled except for the “boys” and “girls” signs on the restrooms. I wandered into what I thought might be the office, and saw a small vacated desk that a previous secretary sometime in the past had used. Further into this room was a small cluttered office on the left; this office was clearly in use but presently unoccupied. A light was on in the office to the right, so I wandered in and found the principal at work answering emails on his computer. His office was small, perhaps 8 feet by 10 feet, with walls covered in old brown paneling. One wall was simply adorned with framed awards and family pictures, while on the opposite side a tall bookshelf ran about six feet down the wall. A very clean ten gallon aquarium bubbled quietly in the corner. The drop ceiling had white acoustic tiles, and at the end of the room was a tiny window. His desk was L-shaped and cluttered, as were the bookshelves and a spare small table just inside the entrance. I introduced myself, and he quickly got up from his computer to greet me. Though his office was a little cluttered, he personally was very organized. He had been expecting me, had read all the materials I had sent him, and was prepared for the interview. He seemed very busy and distracted each time I spoke with him later in the day, which was understandable when he explained his workload. In addition to his brand new duties as principal, he was also still responsible for the IT network duties of his previous job at the high school. Though overworked, he was the consummate professional and I observed that he treated me and the students and staff with the utmost respect and courtesy throughout the day.

He led me on a tour of this classroom building, the lunchroom/computer lab building, and pointed out the building that housed the boot school program for students who had been ordered to attend this program by the court. After viewing the spartan exteriors of the building, I was pleasantly surprised to find the interiors of the buildings were clean and well furnished. A bank of 25 new computers lined the computer lab, and the industrial low nap grey carpet appeared new. The counselor's office/classroom had several nice couches, and the bathrooms and hallways were very clean.

The principal relayed a story of budget cutbacks that had trickled down and hit the alternative school especially hard. Since it was awarded the Outstanding Alternative School award two years ago, the board of education cut a large portion of the school's funding and changed its mission. The school formerly had four teachers to serve the 40 to 50 student population. To offset budget cuts, the board reassigned two of the teachers to the high school; one of the teachers chose instead to retire. Where Cleveland had formerly been a school of choice that focused on helping at-risk students get caught up and graduate, but this past year the board of education decreed all students who failed a class at the main high school would be forced to attend Cleveland; as a result the previous principal chose to resign. Thomas, the current principal, was the full-time IT director for the school system, but—since he had previous principal experience—had been coerced into becoming the Cleveland principal while also expected to continue fulfilling his IT duties. Thomas summed up his disappointment in the current turn of events. “I am eligible for retirement in two years,” he told me jadedly, “and...I will.”

#### **Thomas, Cleveland Alternative Academy Principal**

Thomas was a short white male in his 50s, about 5'6" and of stout build, weighing 150 or 160 pounds. He wore a mustache trimmed short, and wire frame glasses. He was dressed in a collared dress shirt, dark slacks, and loafers. Although the subject did not come up, I suspected Thomas had a military background. His hair was cut short in a relatively flat-top style crew cut.



He stood straight, acted in a professional manner, and gave polite, crisp, confident responses to questions. Thomas described Cleveland Academy's mission as an alternative school designed to serve students in grades 7 through 12. However, due to very recent budget constraints and low staffing, the administration currently focused on grades 9 through 12. He added they presently had two students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He mentioned that Cleveland accepts students from surrounding school districts as well, which he referred to as "sending schools" or "co-op schools." Whereas some alternative schools were at a separate site from the mainstream high school, Cleveland was located in a former elementary school just "down the hill" about 400 yards from the high school. Since Cleveland at that moment was only allowed one Math teacher and one English teacher, they served the students' other curricular needs one of two ways: through a computer lab where they can use an Odyssey computer curriculum, or students can ride a shuttle bus which every hour transports students up to the high school to attend classes in their other required core subjects and electives. Thomas appeared to appreciate the convenience and proximity of the high school. Cleveland Academy also houses a "boot school" program, in which "adjudicated students from the court" are compelled by court order to attend during the day. Boot school is a combination of educations; curricular education, physical education, and character education. Students begin each school day with an hour of intense physical training (PT), then work on homework at a bank of computers. In the afternoon the school counselor leads a short character education class, and then the students return to their school work, sometimes punctuated with periods of intense physical exercise, as needed to redirect students' attention, at the discretion of the school resource officer who administrates the program.

Comparing discipline between Cleveland and the mainstream high school, Thomas was hesitant because he was a first-year Cleveland principal. He stated, "we do abide by the high school's handbook, and we abide by the high school schedule, so basically all of the expectations of the students there are expectations here." He "knocked on wood" as he remarked that they had not had any serious discipline problems in his short tenure there. He did recall suspending a

student for having drug paraphernalia on his person.

We handled it the same way as what anybody in the district would, that is, an automatic out of school suspension. As far as drug paraphernalia, then we will work with the co-op school in this case to find an academic program with that school, but they were not allowed to return until semester break.

When asked how to handle relatively minor infractions such as cursing and profanity, he mentioned counseling and how he has important it is to be aware of the home life of some of their students.

Basically we try to handle it through a counseling situation. The majority of our students come from home situations that are challenging, to say the least, so we—not that we give them extra leniency—but we do understand that is probably what they hear a lot at home, and so it's a natural release for them from the environment they live in daily, not that we want to excuse it and say it's okay. Again, most of it will be done during a counseling situation.

He related that Sergeant Sid at the boot school handled these minor infractions through “some kind of physical activity, whether it’s jumping jacks, pushups, or whatever.” He added that sometimes he just sends the student home for the remainder of the day, and allows them to come back the next day. He emphasized that all of these resolutions were “short-term,” hinting that the mainstream high school would deal with these same infractions using longer term penalties.

Thomas emphasized, “Suspension, of course, is our last step in any actions we do.” He described some short-term “separations from the student body” that the mainstream high school, middle school, and elementary schools sometimes employ. He listed these as in-school suspension, short-term remediation, and long-term remediation. The mainstream high school handles its own in-school suspensions, but short- and long-term remediation is actually run through yet another program housed on the Cleveland campus. The middle school and

elementary schools apparently do not handle in-school suspensions in-house, so they farm the students out to Cleveland for short (a day or two) or longer (a week or two) remediations (that in reality are just short term in-house suspensions). Thomas stressed that though in-house suspension is a last resort, for some situations administration feels it is best to separate the student from the student body temporarily.

It just gets the students out of the flow of the normal student body and the normal day, just basically to remove them from situations for a little bit; and a lot of times, especially in middle school, they're looking for the attention and that's why they do some of their actions and behaviors, so just removing them from their audience sometimes is a help.

Thomas felt zero-tolerance disciplinary approaches are appropriate any time there the students' safety is questionable. He quantified safety as anything to do with violence or injury to another student. He touched on the subject of fighting, noting the questions raised by "the constant debate as far as what is fighting? What is assault? Does the student have the right to defend themselves? If they're defending themselves, do they get in as much trouble as the student who comes and jumps them?" He lamented that opinions vary from principal to principal, parent to parent, student to student, and school resource officer to school resource officer. He did say that in the case of assault the school resource officer at the mainstream school will usually arrest the student and walk them out of the school in handcuffs.

Thomas found it regrettable when a school board policy allows administrators little flexibility when dealing with individual situations; "sometimes school board policy boxes in administration, and I think boxes in teachers, when it says if it is step seven, you got to take action nine." He thinks it is unfortunate that suspensions are often a "knee-jerk" reaction based on a set-in-stone policy, leaving no time to individualize discipline; "Unfortunately, you didn't get a chance to work on a relationship up to step seven before he got in trouble."

Thomas did not think the size of a school matters as long as the entire staff and teachers is outside the classroom or office mixing with the kids and building relationships. He felt if the

adults in the school would take the time to get invested in their students, and interact with their students, then the size of the school is not important. He further claimed that if an adult has invested in the relationship, it is easier to deal with a discipline experience due to that relationship with the student.

You know, I really think if the teachers are involved with being present, and I'm talking present in locations outside the classroom, I don't think the size of the campus matters. It's the adult involvement, and not just teachers, also the adult involvement because from counselors to custodians to cafeteria workers to everybody, if they're present and out and mixing with the kids, and having that relationship, I don't think the size is really an issue. Our middle school principals are probably the best people I have ever seen as far as mixing with the students. They have, I guess I'll call it, the gift of mixing with the students, and one in particular, he's got this phenomenal relationship with the students that if he has to be the heavy with them, he can be their best friend in two minutes because he's with them all the time. He's constantly out in the hall mixing with them, he's at activities mixing with them, and he's at lunch duty mixing with them, before school mixing with them. I think that is so huge that a lot of discipline issues are curbed because of that, and so going back to the size question if the adults would take time to get invested in their students, and interact with their students, in my opinion I don't think it matters if you have 10,000 students, as long as you have enough adults to have that interaction with them.

Thomas recalled the in-school suspension and short-term remediation procedures mentioned earlier. He then detailed a program at the high school defined as short-term alternative placement (STAP), yet another program housed on the Cleveland campus. Students placed in STAP do not attend school during regular hours; instead, they attend an extended session after school. This allows the student to be with a certified teacher that will work with them four days a week. On Fridays, they are back in the regular classroom to exchange assignments or take tests

with their regular teachers. This pattern repeats until the school feels the student has fulfilled their STAP obligation. Attendance is taken daily, transportation is not provided, and the responsibility for getting to class falls on the student and parent. If the student shows regular attendance and good progress, they are allowed to return to the mainstream high school full time.

Thomas communicated the Care team process, in which the whole staff meets once a month to discuss students' needs and issues. He stressed prevention as a key to successful discipline, noting "we try to know kind of those at-risk students and behaviors ahead of time." With this knowledge the staff and teachers can preemptively change a student's schedule or suggest other ideas in order to curb the discipline issues they predict could occur otherwise.

Though his board had recently removed corporal punishment from their school district, Thomas had experience with it and recommended it as a viable alternative to suspending a student. He underscored that corporal punishment can be positive discipline if handled methodically, with mutual respect, and is based on a relationship already built with the disciplined student.

The same assistant principal I was talking to you about that had a great relationship the students had the most methodical paddling that I've ever seen, because I witnessed his paddling several times, and I mean you could just about mark it off the checklist as far as the process he goes through. I think when it's done in a manner like that, and it's not done out of malice—his last step of every process is shake the students hand and say no hard feelings, and he won't let the student go until he says the same thing back—it's such a hard call. Where does paddling stop being influential for students, and when does it become they're beating me because they don't like me? That is such a fine line. I never really did consider the paddling an abusive thing, because it was never done out of malice that I've ever seen. But that is one of those things that is an alternative to suspension. Again, that was one of those last step things, just like suspension is the last step. I think everybody in our district is a firm believer that the child is going learn better in that

regular classroom placement than anyplace else.

**Mandy, Cleveland Academy teacher**

Mandy was a diminutive white female in her 30s, and was about 5'4" or 5'6". She wore small round glasses, wore her brown hair cut short, and overall was a very unimposing figure—rather unexpected in an alternative academy where most staff stood tall and projected an air of confidence. She taught English, and fit quite well the picture of a quiet, introspective author. However, when she talked, she spoke eloquently, easily, and with confidence. She was friendly and open, and it was obvious by observing her conversations in the hallway and classroom that the students liked and respected her. Mandy had a rough introduction to teaching during her first year at an urban low-socioeconomic high school. She admitted, "It was rough. I worked there for one year and I decided to stop teaching for a while." She grew up in a small country school and confessed she was not prepared for the stresses of that urban school setting.

When describing Cleveland Academy, Mandy noted recent changes in the structure of the school's mission:

Well, since I came here there's been some changes at the school. When I first started it was kind of a school where if you chose to come here for whatever reason, and you felt like you are ostracized down there, or maybe you had a child, and we needed to work to accommodate your hours, or whatever the reasons were. Then last year, because of funding, they decided to change it and make it where if people failed their class and weren't keeping up with the proper credits they were sent here the first day of school.

Mandy regretted that the students were not even told they were going to be coming to Cleveland until the first day of school when they were loaded on a bus and shuttled down the hill to the alternative academy. She estimated that the current mission of the school, three-fourths of the way through the school year, had transformed again, and now landed somewhere in between the differing philosophies. Cleveland currently accepts students both behind in credits and at-risk of dropping out.

Mandy observed that discipline at a mainstream high school is much swifter, and “it’s very precise; it’s either this way or you’re out.” By contrast, at Cleveland a student would have to be involved in a whole series of events before they were suspended or expelled. She took note of Cleveland Academy’s small size being an advantage because “here it’s kind of more talk through it, and kind of work on it. It’s so small you can really get to know what people’s problems are, or if some people have an issue and you have to deal with them differently.” When quizzed about minor infractions like cursing, Mandy doubted that “anybody would even notice because it’s so crowded, and there’s so much chaos.” At Cleveland she asserted that she would probably just tell them to stop cursing, and then either talk to them about any underlying problems, or send them to talk to the adult of their choice. Mandy claimed every student at Cleveland had someone they felt comfortable talking to about their problems.

Mandy considered suspension and expulsion appropriate punishments for students who bring weapons or drugs to school. She was unsure as to whether she would classify a Swiss Army knife, for example, to be a dangerous weapon, but maintained, “I don’t think that you can say that one thing is okay, and then another isn’t.” She affirmed her opinion that some situations require an immediate and constant consequence. Her beliefs carried over to the subject of fighting; for that, also, she believed students should be immediately suspended for a certain period of time. She commented that she could see some instances where physical violence could be warranted, but felt that if she were placed in that situation she would be willing to take the suspension.

Mandy stated that the small size of Cleveland had a positive effect on discipline. She sensed that at Cleveland every student, no matter how standoffish, could find a staff member or teacher to talk to about problems.

I think it helps to get to know what the individual’s strengths and weaknesses are, and some students have various impulse control problems and things like that, and strangely enough those are the students we like the best, because we get to know them a little bit

better. I think it's easier to control them because they have got respect for someone if they chose to come here, and I think there's always someone in the school who can sit down and speak to them. It may not be at that minute, but maybe they can come to that classroom and wait, and when the teacher has a spare moment to speak to them about whatever the problem is. And the people in the office, or sometimes our custodian, I mean, they've all got somebody that will listen to their problems so I think that helps.”

Mandy sensed that at the high school students feel as if they were some anonymous person, and that “people don't recognize, really, what your good and bad qualities are.”

She did not believe a suspension, regardless of length, “has much effect on deterring behavior, especially if they're someone who doesn't really like school, it's a bit of a reward.” Mandy did make an exception, recalling a student who had been expelled, then returned, and was now respectful and working hard to get caught up. She discerned that longer suspensions caused students to worry about falling behind in their schoolwork, but that shorter suspensions of 3 to 5 days had little effect on their behavior.

Mandy's first suggestion for discipline alternatives was to praise the boot school housed on Cleveland's campus. She indicated that some students who had been released from boot school later wished they were back in that disciplined environment because “they don't have a lot of self-motivation to accomplish the goals that they wish.” She also suggested breaking the students into small groups either at the beginning or end of each day to discuss that day's problems and give each other advice. Mandy recommended keeping schools small and personal, because she believed Cleveland Academy had very few discipline problems since the students all knew each other and stuck up for each other.

### **Martha, Cleveland Academy teacher**

Martha was a white female in her 50s, rather short at about 5'4” or 5'6” and of relatively slender build. She had medium length dark-colored hair curled in a slightly disheveled bun, and her reading glasses, when not propped on the end of her nose, were stuck in this bun on the top of



her head. Martha had been informed I was coming to interview her during her plan, but when another teacher walked me to her door and knocked, Martha unlocked the door, peered out with a cellphone held to her ear, frowned and shoo-ed me away, saying she would come get me later. I sat in the hallway for five minutes while she finished her call, then the door opened and in a gravelly voice she mumbled, “All right.”

She sat me down in an uncomfortable wooden classroom desk pointed toward the front of the classroom. She walked around and sat at her desk, facing me at a ninety degree angle. Her computer monitor was on her desk in our line of sight, and she chose to peer over it at me for the entire interview, so that only her eyes, forehead, and hair bun were visible. I had the feeling, not for the first time, that I was in trouble. I suspected this student desk was where she sat the troublemakers to keep an eye on them. She was slow to respond to questions, and—like the students I interviewed—answered questions using a single sentence most of the time. Martha was quick, in her manner, to point out that she did not volunteer to teach at Cleveland. She claimed she was assigned here because that is a tactic administration uses to force people into retirement—making them teach at the alternative school, “That’s the way they want to treat you when you get a little older, I guess, they don’t do it to everybody, but they do it to a lot of people.”

When asked to describe the school and students, all Martha could come up with is, “We have a lot of absences. I don’t know what to do about that.” When probed about what she would do, she thought maybe she would call the parents; “I don’t see what else works—you tell them how much they need to be here.” When further asked why students attend here instead of the main high school, she muttered, in a slurred fashion, “Well, I don’t know for sure, but I heard it could be absences in the big setting. But I don’t know for sure.”

When comparing discipline at Cleveland to discipline at the main high school, Martha suspected “they don’t really talk to the students at the big high school.” She questioned the fairness of the main high school’s fighting policy.

Like, for instance, I don't think a student should just stand there and keep taking punches. I think you should be able to defend yourself instead of just standing there and getting beat up, you know, things like that. But they still might get the same punishment, I mean, I don't know for sure. That's what I've heard. I just think you should be able to defend yourself.

On the subject when zero-tolerance discipline is proper, Martha laconically responded, “Drugs. I think it’s appropriate.” When prodded for a deeper response, and prompted for her thoughts on the subject of weapons, she murmured, “Yeah. It should be for that, too.” She expanded, finally, on another infraction; “I don’t agree with suspending for dipping.” She believed students should be given a warning first, at least “giving them the chance to not do that again—letting them know that’s not acceptable.”

Martha ultimately warmed a little bit to the topic and listed several other discipline alternatives currently in use at Cleveland and the main high school, such as in-school suspension, assigning students to the boot school, coming to school only from 4 -7 p.m., and attending regular day school while also attending school from 4-7 p.m. Her final idea was unique in that it appeared to reverse the suspension process; instead of sending the students home, bringing the parents to school and make them sit in the classroom. She claimed one of her student’s parents had done this, and it had embarrassed the student and, to a degree, the parent.

#### **Nathan, Cleveland Academy student**

Nathan was a skinny Native American male, standing about 5’10” and weighing about 130 pounds. He wore a black t-shirt and jeans, and his black hair hung over his ears and collar and fell into his eyes; just as it came over his eyebrows, he had styled it to flare out, almost feathered, to the side, a current hair style common with adolescent males. His tanned face showed signs of acne, but he had no visible piercings or tattoos, unusual in an alternative school student. He was quiet and polite, and sat across from me at a round table in the counselor’s classroom. He angled his body to the side so he was not looking at me face to face, and he did

not make eye contact, which I attributed to his Native American culture. I had been warned that he might not want to talk, and I did notice his answers to questions were very short. He did make an effort to answer every question, but he rarely used more than one sentence to answer them.

Nathan described Cleveland Academy students as students who are failing, behind their graduating class, or dropouts. He was here because he had dropped out his sophomore year, remained a dropout through his junior year, and had returned this senior year in an effort to graduate this year. He found discipline at the alternative school similar to the mainstream high school. He felt there were more discipline incidents at the mainstream school due mainly to the higher numbers of students. For minor incidents like cursing, he said the high school would put a student in in-school suspension, but Cleveland rarely suspended a student for incidents like that. He observed that Cleveland did occasionally put students in boot school for discipline, but “you have to do something extreme to get sent the boot school. Down here they just really tell you don't do it again, that's basically it.”

Nathan related a story about a student he knew who had drugs and a knife on him at school, and as a result was expelled. Nathan thought suspension is appropriate if staff has already given a student a warning and the student continued to “mess up,” but felt strongly that “the kid needs to be at school.” When asked what he would have done with the student, he suggested putting him in boot school, “because he'd still be in school.”

Nathan perceived the main difference in discipline between the high school and alternative school was that of anonymity, feeling that more people are aware of—and learned from—a student's consequences when they occur in a small school setting, and, therefore, “it's faster to get the concept.” He sensed it helped with discipline when everyone knows why a kid got in trouble. In the main high school, “If one kid gets in trouble only that kid's friends know he's in trouble because there's so many kids down there.”

When Nathan was suspended for skipping school a lot, he came back to school worried about being behind in his studies, and feels most students feel the same way; “I got suspended

and I come back to school thinking I was way behind in my work, and thinking I messed up, and I needed to buckle up and get back on track.” Nathan felt amused that the high school handled his poor attendance by suspending him, thinking, “Well, I thought it was funny, because I didn't go to school, so they would kick me out of school?”

Nathan's ideas for discipline alternatives involved in-school suspension and the STAP program. Nathan's perception of the STAP program as a viable alternative to suspension was “STAP is like an afterschool detention basically, so it's like an extra two hours of school—I'd probably do that.” He continued this thought by claiming he would keep disciplined students in school during the regular day, but then require they go to school longer, after school, in addition.

#### **Jill, Cleveland Academy student**

Jill was a short white female student, about 5'6” and of medium build. She had straight blond hair falling onto her shoulders, and a very pale complexion. She was wearing a loose sweater and blue jeans, and seemed shy and nervous. She met me in the counselor's classroom, and we sat across from each other at the same round table where I interviewed Nathan just moments before. Like Nathan, she was very quiet and reserved, and it was very hard to get her to answer questions completely. She, too, replied to my questions with one-sentence answers, and was reluctant to elaborate on anything. She is not Native American, but her shy mannerisms and lack of eye contact were very similar to those of Nathan.

Jill depicted Cleveland Academy as a school for students who have had a troubled past, but are trying to better themselves. She listed qualities of a troubled past as being behind on credits, or pregnant, or involved with drugs, or ordered to boot school, or just in trouble in general. Jill felt discipline policies were very similar at the main high school and the alternative school, declaring the principal tries to be “as much like the regular high school” as possible. When asked how minor infractions like cursing were handled, she maintained they were handled the same, with the student being suspended. Upon further reflection, though, she softened her stance and added that “our principal, he may talk to them. I think that he may communicate with

them, and see what the situation was and stuff.”

Jill felt suspension and expulsion was appropriate for physically fighting and bringing weapons and drugs into the school, but found it inappropriate for little things like loud verbal arguments. Jill couldn't actually describe incidents she was aware of in which a student got suspended or expelled. She was vaguely aware that if a student brings drugs to school, they are automatically suspended, but again, was not aware of someone who had committed that infraction. She did comment about an incident that happened at a different school her sister attends. She explained that some kids were looking at something on their cell phone and were sent home for the rest of the day, and Jill did not think that was appropriate. Jill felt suspending a student negatively impacted their learning because “it doesn't help, like it hurts them more than anything, because they don't get to do their school work, and don't get to be in the classroom hearing the teacher and stuff.”

Jill had several ideas for discipline alternatives that did not suspend or expel students. She referred to in-school suspensions, and after-school detention. She remembered that some schools she had attended gave the students a series of warning slips for minor infractions, and then after repeated warnings the student was finally suspended. She recommended having students do chores such as cleaning up at lunch, washing tables, and picking up trash outside. She liked the idea of a student having a choice in punishments, and recalled that at her sister's school the student could either clean or get detention. She reflected that detention would probably make the students think about what they did more than hurriedly cleaning off a table.

### **Kyle, Cleveland Academy therapeutic counselor**

Kyle was a muscular black male in his 30s who towered over most of the students at Cleveland Academy. He stood about 6'3" and weighed in the neighborhood of 240 pounds. He shaved his head, as well as his face, and wore a tight sport shirt over loose-fitting jeans and brown loafers. Although Kyle was extremely fit, he walked with a limp, and as he approached me I noticed his hands were deformed. It appeared he was born without some of his fingers. Kyle was

very gregarious and outgoing, spoke in a deep bass register, and laughed easily. It was obvious from my observations that he had a wonderful rapport with the students at the main Academy as well as the adjudicated students whom he counseled in group sessions at the adjacent boot school.

Kyle portrayed Cleveland Academy students as predominantly Native American. Many of the students have attended multiple schools, and Kyle depicted Cleveland as a “catch-all” school that collected students from other school systems as well. He professed that Cleveland students cannot make it in the regular high school for a number of reasons; they cannot get along with the teachers, they talk back to teachers or staff, some have poor attendance, and some have been expelled for fighting. He explained, “a lot of kids come here because they can work at a different pace; it's a little more lax, you get 10 minute breaks in between classes, and they get to work at their own pace at the computer.”

Asked to compare discipline between the mainstream high school and Cleveland, Kyle replied that although the administration here tried to mimic the rules at the main high school, in reality discipline here was “I would say one step below the rules over there.” He made mention of how the small school size allows staff and teachers to keep a close eye on the students.

The structure that we have is a little bit more monitored as far as like, we have somebody with our kids all the time, and if you look at how they transition between classes they don't have 5 feet to go either way. And a lot of them are on a zero, kind of like, they slack off or something, we watch them a little bit more closely than watching 1200 students because we only have 60 to 40 students here.

Kyle indicated that overall the discipline between the two schools was very similar, citing the fact that students who get into fights or are absent more than 10 days will be suspended or dropped at either school. The main difference, he concluded, was that at Cleveland the majority of students “know this is their last chance to get education, because when they leave from here it's job corps or they go to GED classes.” (Job Corps is a program that focuses not on awarding students a high school diploma, but rather on teaching students the basic skills necessary to secure

employment in the workforce.) Kyle reiterated that incidents like fights and suspensions were rare at Cleveland, but related an episode from three years ago in which a young woman was indeed suspended from the alternative school.

We had two young ladies get into a fight and they both got suspended because they both got suspended from the high school for fighting. So we mimic our same rules here about fighting at both places. And another reason they got suspended is because one of them, or both of them, had already been in boot school. So, if you see what I'm saying, they went and got suspended from the high school, completed the boot school program, came to alternative school, and got kicked out. And so what they did is they pretty much burned all their bridges in all three places, so they got suspended for three days and then came back.

Kyle wished the district's suspension and expulsion process were more formalized. He detected no formal plan of action in the district's policies concerning incidents like hate crimes and verbal abuse. He established that policies were cut-and-dried if a student brings a knife to school—that student is automatically kicked out. But the policies for other infractions, such as drug use, were not so clear. He illustrated the point by recounting how Cleveland Academy handles it when a student tests positive “for marijuana or something. Instead of expelling them, they have to do four or five hours of drug counseling with me and then we retest them. After that five weeks, and if they test clean, they get to stay.” He recapped that he would just like to see more of a formal process in place for infractions of a less immediate danger than bringing weapons than school.

Kyle felt zero-tolerance discipline is appropriate when “when it's an incident that's endangering the safety, the physical and mental safety, of another student.” He included bullying in the domain of mental safety, noting that sometimes students are driven to suicide because their “mental safety” is compromised by another student or students. Kyle extended this thought that bullied students are not only driven to harm themselves, but sometimes are driven to lash out

violently against other students.

Kyle was unsure whether suspending a student actually impacted their behavior, “I think it doesn't really affect them, because suspension for some kids that's a straight A student, it's the end of the world for them. A kid that doesn't really care, it's like vacation.” He wondered how to find the middle ground that makes suspension effective, “to kind of help getting them out of their comfort zone so we can make it uncomfortable for them?”

Kyle explained a suspension prevention alternative that Cleveland Academy calls a Care Group. The group is made up of any pertinent or interested counselors, teachers, and staff members who work to address student issues of mental health, physical health, personal hygiene, difficult home lives, and a host of other issues.

Students are referred by teachers within the school system, or somebody that works in the school system like a support staff, and what they do is they write their concerns out as to why this needs to be brought in front of the care team. What the care team does, we brainstorm ideas of how to help this child address their issues, and man, it doesn't really keep them from getting suspended, but I think it helps them come up with a plan. I wrote a plan one time, it was called a truancy intervention plan. Instead of allowing kids to drop from school, don't you want to know why they're dropping? So what we did is we wrote a plan to take them in front of the judge, get them a court order to go through the program, and once they went through the program, then they would be assigned a therapist, a therapeutic counselor, an academic counselor, and a peer support counselor. And then they had to meet with those people once a week to identify the problems of where and why they weren't coming school. So that's what we're doing differently, as far as like staffing students through from a faculty position. We address finding alternatives that are pretty much in-house in the school system. If it doesn't work in our system, a last option is to suspend them.



### **Adams Alternative Academy**

Adams Alternative Academy is located in a college town of 45,688 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). The racial makeup of the city was 72% white, 9% Native American, 9% Hispanic, 7% African American, 2% Asian, and 1% other. Sixteen percent of the population was below the poverty line, and the median income level was \$42,979. Adams was housed in a former elementary school, and the two-story main body of the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as an historic place worthy of preservation. A single-story wing was added to each side of the historic middle section long ago, creating one long, narrow school with a center hallway a full city block long. The building was originally red brick, but had been painted tan. Large four-pane windows, six feet tall, eight feet wide, and spaced about three feet apart, ran the entire length of the front of the building. The original windows of both the historic section and the two wings had been replaced with double pane insulated windows. The front of the building had a nicely landscaped flowerbed with lots of well-manicured shrubs and small trees. The large lawn was mowed, edged, and trimmed, and had very few weeds. Two large oak trees guarded the entrance, their trunks surrounded by river rock landscaping and picnic benches where students and visitors could sit in the shade. The building did double duty as a bus barn, and the long building concealed behind it an enormous parking with over 30 parked buses.

Inside, the beige tile floor gleamed, having been recently waxed and buffed. The secretary in the office to the immediate right of the entrance greeted all visitors cheerfully and quickly checked them in. Each vertical riser on the stairway on the left side of the entrance hallway was painted with a different character word, such as “integrity,” “trustworthiness,” and so on up the stairs. Ten steps in from the entrance was a tall round table with 4 swivel bar stools around it, where each morning for an hour and a half—until first hour was underway—the principal sat with her iPad. She greeted the 90 to 100 students as they arrived, answered emails, and chatted with staff. From this strategic vantage point, she was able to see the entrance as well as look left and right up and down the long single hallway. Though the building shared a School

Resource Officer (SRO) with the main high school located two miles away, the SRO rarely visited. The principal, eight teachers, three staff members and a counselor were very visible, active, and involved in the building, and they routinely managed discipline incidents without the SRO's help.

Large classrooms, about 20 feet by 30 feet, lined both sides of this long hallway. The classrooms on the north side of the hall looked out upon the lovely front lawn, while the classrooms on the south side of the hallway received lots of southern sun exposure but looked out only on a parking lot full of buses. Some classrooms were carpeted with short nap brown carpet, while in others the carpet had been removed and the original wood floors had been refinished. On the west end a classroom had been converted to weight room, and on the east end was a computer lab with 12 new computers and a SmartBoard.

Adams received sufficient funding from the district to pay for everything needed to operate the school on a daily basis. The principal took it upon herself to write several federal grants that provided funds to pay half of a Department of Human Services (DHS) worker's salary (DHS paid the other half) and all the stipends needed to pay three teachers to run night school two days per week and summer school for one month during the summer. The DHS worker was housed in a tiny office next to the counselor's office, and the two worked together to provide for students' needs.

**Karen, Adams Academy principal, and Lori, Adams Academy teacher**

In addition to their principal and teacher duties, Karen and Lori served as volunteer lunch monitors. They watched the halls and grounds during lunchtime so the rest of the staff and teachers could have a quiet, duty-free lunch together. They asked to be interviewed together during this time, so we sat at the end of the hallway where they simultaneously scrutinized the hallway, parking lot, and basketball court while they answered my questions. Karen is a white female in her 50's with shiny, straight brown hair brushed straight back with no part. She is about 5'8" and of medium build, and due to her tanned complexion needed very little makeup.

She was comfortably dressed in a collared shirt, khaki slacks, and open-toed sandals. She displayed little jewelry, and wore only small hoop earrings and a wedding band. While Karen, the principal, chose to dress simply, Lori enjoyed accessorizing. She is a tall white female with a slender build, about 5'10", with the dark hair and dark eyes that hinted of Italian/European ancestry. She wore dark slacks, black leather shoes, a white collared shirt covered by a pastel long-sleeve sweater, and she wore a light-colored scarf wrapped around her neck. Her makeup was perfect, and her long black hair had been blow-dried, curled, and styled carefully. She wore large dangling earrings, and walked with a slow, glamorous air.

Karen characterized Adams as a school for students aged 14 to 21 who were at risk of school failure, behind on school credits, or dropouts who wished to return and complete their graduation credits. She described the school district discipline policies as recently becoming more flexible depending on what the infraction was.

I would say that for the severest infractions recently we modified them, so that we are no longer doing the zero-tolerance, and looking at the situation or case individually, and even included in our policy and procedures manual a form that allows a guardian to file an appeal. So that is always given at the hearing, so that parents are more encouraged to appeal if they don't agree with the consequence that's happening, even though they may agree that their student has done, whatever.

Lori agreed that the modified policies involved the parents more. She felt it important to remove the disconnection between school and parents, and that parents should be included in the disciplinary process. Karen interjected that most parents, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, were not even aware of an appeals process, and they "just took what was given to them, even though maybe it wasn't fair. They're so overwhelmed with all these, quote, 'educated people' in the room."

Karen considered suspension a factor that puts students at risk of school failure. She underscored the importance of maintaining, not breaking, the connection between student and

school.

I really think that I've really tried to make the option of either night school, summer school, service learning, you know, something we can provide to be a part of it, just to keep the kid linked to the school somewhere. I've even made going to drug rehab; you cannot interview until you've done a program for the youth services agency, this kind of, putting a rope of hope out there, so that if you do this, we will let you come back.

Karen offers these alternatives to all students that she finds out have been suspended from the mainstream high school for longer than a semester, "because you can't be out of school for two semesters and not make yourself at risk for school failure." She persisted that this is a better option for students, because the mainstream school will only let suspended students turn in work weekly. This has proven to be an unrealistic option, she said, because "I have never found a student who has passed their classes and done that, because teachers say, well, they weren't here for this assignment and this assignment, and they can't separate their [the student's] school attendance from what they completed."

Lori thought suspension affects a student adversely because there is a negative faculty and administrative attitude surrounding the whole suspension process. She stressed the need for addressing each case individually, and for fostering an environment of mutual respect.

I think that it's so important to take each one case by case, and I'm thinking about the students who come to us, I think the process is so important, because if they feel that they know they've done something wrong, and we say, you know, we have to try something different with you now, or you're going to be here for three weeks—I think if it's done in a positive, proactive manner, and a respectful way, I think that can change the outlook, no matter what the length of time is.

Karen echoed Lori's sentiments; "I think the kid knows, because of comments that are made, that they have a scarlet A on them for the rest of their school years," and that what the student has done will follow them from school to school. Lori continued, "It's like a self-

fulfilling prophecy, where a month from now the kid will think, I'm just gonna live that out."

Karen complained about the ineffectiveness of arresting a student and leading them out in handcuffs in front of the whole school, "There's nowhere to go with punishment after you've already been walked down the aisle, handcuffed, and put in the court system." The student is then labeled as "the arrested kid," a result that, with respect to the goals of discipline, is not useful because, in Lori's words, "then they're the hero, they're like an outlaw." Lori and Karen agreed that, unless students are an imminent threat to themselves or another person, there was never a need to "put a kid on the ground and handcuff him." Karen related another disadvantage to this scenario is when the student's response to their treatment becomes a discipline issue in and of itself.

I think it gets into a power struggle, and the kid's like, yes you are, no I'm not, yes you are, well I'm leaving, no you're not leaving—and so it becomes something like that. And then it wasn't necessarily the incident that got them thrown on the ground; it was the response to somebody who is in a powerful position over them, who is bullying them into, you know, we all have that fight or flight mechanism in us, and especially if you have somebody that's more powerful, that holds all your cards, you're gonna go okay, I'm not just giving up, I'm gonna fight, I don't need this.

Karen suggested again that all suspensions should be automatically appealed by the parent or guardian; she insisted this policy should be in place to protect the parent's rights. Since some parents are intimidated by school administrators, she recommended the parent be appointed an advocate—not connected with the school site—who would advise and otherwise help parents work through the appeals process. Karen understood it is hard for administrators to be objective about some kids' behavior "because they have been such a pain," and thought an advocate would be able to "look at this, at the bigger picture on this, because it's hard to be objective with some kids." Karen said a big part of what makes the new appeals process work is that of choice. If administrators agree to lift the suspension or expulsion, and the students agree to attend the

alternative academy, then the choice of coming to Adams Academy is offered as an alternative to suspension.

Karen strongly believed that school discipline needed to move in a “restorative justice practices” direction. When asked to elaborate, she said,

by that I mean look at the infringement, work with the kid, instead of at or to them, and try to restore the justice in the whole process. Make it be more a learning experience, and a reason to change, instead of a punishment situation and a reason not to change.

She used three new 9<sup>th</sup> grade students at Adams Academy as an example. They had each been suspended from the mainstream high school. Karen, along with other Adams Academy staff, got involved in how justice was meted out to these students, and convinced the high school to lift the suspension and release the students to Adams Academy. One student had a drug problem, so he was placed in a drug therapy program and allowed to attend Adams. One was at risk of becoming a teen mother, so she was placed in a parenting program to raise her awareness level, and allowed to attend Adams. Another student’s dad had passed away, which led to the student’s anger issues, so he was placed in counseling and allowed to attend Adams. All of these efforts were attempts to correct students’ behavior by helping them “restore” themselves.

Lori and Karen’s final recommendation was to incorporate alternative education specialists into not only the mainstream high school, but the elementary school and other school sites as well. In that manner at-risk students could be identified early, and interventions and prevention could be put in place sooner than high school.

Make it be a program throughout your school system that has the experts; like I feel I have the building of experts to work with at-risk kids, but those same type of teachers would be at the regular school site—just like we have special ed teachers in math, and language arts, you have those teachers that are experts in this field.

**Alex, Adams Academy student**

Alex is a Native American male of average height and build. He is about 5’10”,

athletically built but slightly out of shape, and his straight black hair is about 3 inches long all around, and a little shaggy. His unkempt hair was covered by a pair of baseball caps. The upper was a completely appropriate baseball cap and entirely covered a second baseball cap, which sported a marijuana leaf emblem. When school ended every day, as he left the building Alex removed the top cap to reveal his marijuana cap. He wore a t-shirt and jeans, and had no visible tattoos or jewelry.

Alex commented that Adams Academy was a school for students who want to graduate “a little quicker.” He dubbed the school’s atmosphere as being “little bit more freewheeling, and not so uptight and everything. It’s like almost everyone gets along with everybody, and like, they’re still like the same cliques and groups and stuff and whatever, but everybody knows everybody, almost.”

Alex succinctly compared discipline at Adams as being “better than there” at the main high school. When encouraged to expand on this brief response, he referenced the issue of tardies.

Here, you can be a minute or two late and not get in that much trouble, or not get into trouble at all, but up there you’re like two seconds late and you’ve got thirty minutes of afterschool detention or you get closed campus and don’t get off campus lunch. It’s just too uptight.

Alex went into depth when he reflected over the suspension policy of the main high school. He considered that at the high school suspension was the punishment of choice for excessive tardies and fights. He related he had rarely seen somebody expelled from school, suspension happened quite frequently, but that usually “suspension is just like where they gotta go home, breathe in, and come back later on in the week or something.” Alex delineated the punishment for a fight was either out-of-school suspension or in-school suspension, depending on what the situation was. He noted “the one that’s getting hit is going to get ISP, because you’re still involved in that fight, you know, but the dude that was beating him up is probably going to

get suspended.” He debated further whether the student getting hit should even be punished, because—in Alex’s opinion—if a person gets hit for no reason then they should not be penalized. When asked if there were times when zero-tolerance discipline was appropriate, Alex again returned to the excessive tardies and the fighting scenario. He again stated that tardy students and victims of fights should not be suspended, whereas bullies and aggressors should be suspended.

Alex was certain that if he were in the principal’s chair, he would not automatically suspend anyone. He declared he would look at each situation individually and investigate what really happened.

If I was principal, I would just say, like I would get down to the bottom of it, like what was he saying, what made you go off on him? And like, if it's something that like isn't tolerated, like the whole mom thing, I wouldn't tolerate someone talking about my mom, especially if they were like calling her all kinds of weird names stuff like that, I wouldn't tolerate that because that's your mom. I would skip down to the bottom of it and see why they started a fight and what caused the whole thing basically.

**Alan, Adams Academy student**

Alan is a tall, lean white male with long straight brown hair over his collar, over his ears, and pushed to the side out of his face. He is about 6’3”, and wore sneakers, blue jeans, and a long-sleeved t-shirt. He told me he liked to skateboard, and his stringy physique implied that skateboarding gave him a lot of exercise. His eyes were sleepy and bloodshot, he had trouble concentrating when asked a question, and he responded in a slow, nasally drawl, as if his sinuses were bothering him. Although his replies were limited to only a short sentence in most instances, he was very polite and friendly, and made a sincere attempt to answer the questions.

Alan concisely pictured Adams Academy as a school “where you can alternatively go to learn at your own pace, there is no forced learning, so you can just work at your own pace.” Alan was not sure how to depict the students who attended Adams, but had a feeling that most of them had “gotten into some altercation with another school or federal law.”



Alan thought discipline policies at his previous school were unreasonable. He remarked that he worked 44 hours per week, and consequently was late to school a lot. He was assigned to detention on Friday after school, and he complained that if he missed a “Friday night’s” detention he was then assigned another Friday night detention and in addition to that four hours of Saturday school.

Alan had trouble recalling incidents in which his old school applied zero-tolerance discipline, but given enough time he admitted he had been in a fight and was almost suspended. He evaded the suspension only because he had already missed so many days of school that if they had suspended him he would not have had enough days present to earn his credits. In his opinion, suspending students for fighting was not an appropriate use of zero-tolerance discipline. He would prefer assigning the students “after school, like, extracurricular activities, like, you can assign them community service, in a way, and to help with sports and stuff, they could be a manager.”

He did deliberate somewhat on when it is appropriate to use zero-tolerance discipline, settling on suspending for bringing guns or weapons to school “if they had the intent to harm somebody.” For alcohol and drug offenses, he disagreed with suspension, justifying his opinion by pointing on that if the student is drinking and using drugs, suspending him is just giving him more time to do those things. Alan preferred that the offending students still be allowed to attend normal day school, but then be assigned to some sort of therapy sessions after school. Though Alan disagreed with suspending students in general, he did find that suspension affected his attitude.

Honestly, you know, I hated being suspended, or even if it's like a six-day, everybody else's in school while you're stuck at home, and you really can't do anything, because you're not with your friends, so, nobody wants to be alone.

Alan’s sole idea for discipline alternatives to suspension was brief but to the point, and suggested that he believed all misbehaviors can be addressed with mutual respect.

Maybe sitting down one-on-one with them, and explaining what they did wrong, and asking them what they think their consequences should be, and reason with them, that way it gives them a chance, they can feel like they're being talked to like an adult and they can give you their ideas.

**Carrie, Adams Academy teacher**

Carrie is a white female in her 40s. She is about 5'8" with a medium build, and wore clean white sneakers, plain blue jeans, and a pink collared blouse under a black windbreaker. She wore bangs that almost touched her brown framed eyeglasses, and the rest of her straight brown hair hung down to her shoulders. She is the busy mother of a college student and a junior high cheerleader. She met me on a day off from work, and was interrupted several times during the interview by text messages from students in her parenting class who were in varying stages of distress and needed advice. Carrie is the mothering type of teacher, frequently giving young mothers and mothers-to-be her cell phone number if she suspected they might not have the normal amount of support at home.

Carrie began by describing Adams Alternative Academy as a very flexible school where students worked at their own pace. She continued, "We have, in my opinion, most of the students who don't have any parenting going on at home. Just kids who haven't been taught to make good choices and that education is not important." She judged discipline at Adams "to be a lot more on an individual basis," and that staff and teachers took more of the big picture into account. She noted discipline policies at Adams, as compared to the main high school, were "not just black and white—there's a little more gray in ours." She suggested that there were still consequences for actions, just as at the main high school, but the consequences were mitigated "because a lot of times, the things we deal with are pretty tame compared to what their environment at home is." Carrie considered the small size of Adams affected discipline in a positive way, and made it easier to implement early intervention to deal with or prevent misbehavior.

You can monitor stuff more easily with a smaller school. Everybody is more aware.

Like if you compared us to the high schools—there are 8 teachers and 120 kids. We can monitor that fairly easily. Whereas you have 30-40 teachers at the high school with 1,200 kids. You can't [monitor behavior easily]. You know, everything kind of comes around here. Somebody is going to hear something. So I think you monitor things a little bit better. So I think you can do some intervention—before things get out of control—at a smaller school, probably.

Carrie deemed the school district's suspension and expulsion process "a little too harsh, maybe." She implied there was too much power in the hands of too few people, with regard to the ability to suspend or expel. She perceived this authority was "almost like a power trip for some of the administrators that they kind of get on these little power trips, and if they don't like the kid, that kid's pretty much out of luck."

Carrie was not personally aware of any students who had been automatically suspended or expelled as a result of zero-tolerance policies, but had heard rumors that this had occurred for possession of marijuana, other drugs, and even pocket knives. She felt zero-tolerance policies were appropriate for "obviously, a real gun or something like that. That is a zero-tolerance issue because you have to keep your school safe." When probed about pocket knives, and possession of marijuana and other drugs, she stated zero-tolerance practices were inappropriate, and effectively placed the students in situations where their misbehavior would get even worse.

I grew up in the country and if you didn't have a pocket knife, you weren't a guy. I think if they are caught with drugs or alcohol, they need to go into some kind of counseling for drugs and alcohol, or drug rehabilitation classes. Or maybe an extended school day, where they still have to go to their classes, but then they have to attend these extra classes. Because junior high and up are at the age where they need some supervision, and if we automatically suspend those kids, we are putting them out on the street. What are they going to do all day? They are going to go further, in my opinion, in the drugs and alcohol.

Carrie advocated a program called Service Learning, which the staff at Adams assigns to students when all parties need a “time-out.” Students are sent out into the community to work at their choice of non-profit agencies. After completing 70 hours of volunteer labor, writing daily in a journal, and writing several essays about what they learned, the student was awarded a Service Learning elective credit.

So they are still working toward their education, so we are still saying, “this is important, however, we all need a time out. So go out and do this and earn a credit. Adjust your behavior. Think about what was going on and then complete this then come back and we will talk.” I think when we do that we promote it as, “It is good for you. It is good for the community.” It gives everybody a break. It’s not really approached as a punishment in most cases. It is an opportunity.

Carrie supported assigning students to night school, as long as administration was careful not to separate the student too much from the main student body. “Night school is a good option because they are still in school, but not with all their buddies. It is kind of being removed, but not too much.” Carrie qualified her night school commendation by adding, “I think if you isolate them too much, then it has a negative effect.”

Carrie summarized her opinions by remarking, “I’m not a very much zero tolerance person, as you know. I am for giving everybody a second chance.” Upon further reflection, she added that part of giving everyone a second chance is giving students counseling as needed. She recommended making school counselors more available, perhaps by assigning scheduling, testing, and other organizational duties to a secretary. Carrie wished that were able to freely visit a counselor or mentor when needed, and not, as is so often the case, walk to the counselor’s office to find the door locked. She finished the interview by stressing the need for more appropriate adult models in the students’ lives; if alternative school students had mentors and community members that they looked up to modeling acceptable behavior, then there would be fewer discipline problems to deal with.

### **Additional Data**

I gathered additional data through informal conversations and observations, follow up telephone interviews, and email communications. I obtained consent forms from, and used pseudonyms for, all individuals I directly quoted in this section. I also included in the data any artifacts that I collected as well as excerpts from documents that participants suggested I read to better illustrate their perceptions. The following information listed below is a collection of this miscellaneous additional data and excerpts.

Kayla, my tour guide at Truman, provided lots of information. About 5'10" and of slender build, Kayla's medium length blonde hair was cut fashionably, parted off center and worn straight. She wore a collared shirt under a leather jacket, designer jeans, and leopard print heels which increased her height to nearly six feet. She walked quickly, talked fast, smiled easily, and had a good rapport with the students she passed in the hall. Her previous occupation was as a corporate convention planner, and she still maintained the fast-paced, well-organized manner of someone who was used to multi-tasking.

Kayla noted that everyone, students and staff alike, addressed each other by their first names. Kayla thought this improved rapport, and spoke to a culture of mutual respect. She described ways that the school worked to meet the students' needs. There is a lounge where kids can hang out and sleep if they have had a rough night. They have a library that will give the students the books if they wish to keep them. The library's computer system is tied into the city and county library, so students can request any book they like. She described how the entire school comes together at the end of the six weeks and talks about what they learned in each class so the students who enroll in that class know what to expect. She mentioned that students are randomly drug tested, not to catch them doing something wrong, but as a signal that points out whose therapy and treatment needs are not being met. She showed me a room cluttered with donated clothing, which the kids are free to sift through and keep. They keep a stocked food pantry, and students who are in need can take food home; this was especially appreciated by

students before holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. Truman provides a clinic, staffed daily from 9 to 1, so students can get help with medications and managing their diabetes or shots. Kayla often mentioned the need for fundraisers to provide the money for all the services that Truman chooses to provide for their students. Kayla talked about the mentorship program, and how approved mentors from the community spend an hour per week with their assigned student, allowing the students to build a relationship with yet another respected adult figure.

As Kayla led me through an English classroom, we stopped and spoke with the students there. While talking discipline, they noted that there was a strict no fighting rule here, which made them feel safer here than at the mainstream school, where they described seeing fights every week or two. They noted how easily they can speak with a counselor, and that often mediation was an effective way of solving disputes. They appreciated being able to talk to their counselor about what was going on so they could handle it in a safer calmer way, When there was an issue with another student, they were encouraged to mediate with a counselor who would help the student to manage that situation.

Students perceived that at the mainstream high school “they don't talk to you, they don't listen to your side of it. Here you get talked to, here you can find someone to talk to, you're treated as something other than a number.” Students also remarked that long suspensions of 45 days or more just encourage a student to drop out, and agreed that “just putting you at your house doesn't solve anything” and suggested discipline alternatives such as community service, forced exercise, being a counselor's aide, and cleaning and stocking the library.

The intake counselor we spoke with in the hallway stated students have so much that they are dealing with outside the classroom that they “tend to redirect, and their defense mechanisms come into play, and they're so defensive that you get into a conflict with them because they can't talk about their thoughts and therefore they act them out.” He was grateful for the large counseling component in the school, and took note of their impact on discipline when they “take quick action not to deal with the point in time situation, but to really look at what the underlying

or the other factors are that are behind this agitation.”

We chatted with Don, the uniformed security guard who “wands” students at the entrance. He is a tall, imposing, bearded black man who has worked security at both Truman and a rough mainstream high school. He claimed the main difference was summed up in one word—caring. At the mainstream high school the teachers were quick to tell a student “shut up, get out of the room,” whereas at Truman they will take the one-on-one time and immediately talk to a student. He mentioned developing a lot of relationships with students at the mainstream school, but had the feeling that the teachers there did not really like that. Don questioned the integrity of those teachers, claiming they were just there for a paycheck, and did not really care about the students. Don was bothered by a system that “every time they do something wrong they’re sending them home for 20, 30, 40, 45 days. That's not right. How are they going to get an education like that?” Don revealed many outside distractions he witnessed kids at the mainstream school dealing with, distractions that he felt the faculty at the mainstream school do not care to investigate.

Some of these kids, I mean, I got a lot to tell you. Some of these kids, they are kids doing grown-up things, you know. Now imagine this, you have like 16 and 17-year-olds, you know what I'm saying, they don't have a life because they're picking up the slack because mommy or daddy is not on their job like they're supposed to be. They're busy cooking, they're busy doing all the stuff, so when they come to school and somebody says the wrong thing to them they're ready to snap and go off, so that these kids are being put in parental positions before they're even ready. And that's what a lot of those faculty members over there are not looking at. They have no idea what this child is going through before they got here, you know, I've seen kids, lack of sleep, no sleep, because they're up with the kids when the parent should be handling the business. Man, I can tell you a lot, man, not eating for three or four days because mommy or daddy didn't go to the grocery store, or gambled all the money away or drinks. That's not fair to the child.

He acknowledged that factors outside school did not give the student the right to misbehave, but he advised that teachers sit down and “talk to the child and understand why that child is behaving the way he is behaving, because there ain't no child just gonna be acting rude for nothing. There's always a reason behind it.”

“I DIDN'T GIVE EVERYBODY A BREAK. YOU WANNA GO OVER THERE AND STAND IN LINE.” This thunderous command to an off-task boot school student greeted me as I walked into the boot school component housed at Cleveland Academy. I visited with Sergeant Sid, who proctors the program, and Jody, the high school wrestling coach who assists Sgt. Sid in teaching and mentoring at the boot school. We spoke during some down time they had while the counselor Kyle had his daily meeting and group counseling session with their boot school cadets. Sgt. Sid was dressed in black military fatigues and black boots, and wore his dark hair in a “high and tight” military crew-cut. He was a white male in his 40s, about 6'0”, lean and fit, weighing probably 180 pounds. He appeared to be in excellent physical condition, and could presumably outperform any boot school student in a contest of jumping jacks, pushups, running, or any of the other intense physical exercises he assigned the students as discipline. Jody was a study in contrasts, being as short as Sgt. Sid is tall, and as wide as Sgt. Sid is slim. Short and heavily muscled, Jody was the high school wrestling coach and certainly looked the part. He was a fair-skinned white male, stood about 5'6”, and certainly had at least 200 pounds packed on his powerful frame. He, too, was dressed in black, and wore track pants, black sweatshirt, and black sneakers. Like Sgt. Sid, he wore his hair close-cropped in a military flat top fashion.

Sgt. Sid described boot school as a partnership program begun about 10 years ago between the school system and the court's juvenile authority system. Sgt. Sid had previously led a similar program at a military-style residential boarding school in another town, and the Cleveland school district convinced him to move to Cleveland and set up a non-residential boot school program with a similar mission and goals. The school provides him the building, a teacher to assist him, and the computers with the educational software. Sgt. Sid articulated how students



are assigned by court order to attend boot school for a minimum of one semester, and before a student is allowed to leave boot school their behavior has to change at home, and they have to prove progress on their academics.

At the semester break in December we have an out review with the judge, and myself, and Coach Jody, and we recommend, hey, this person's done what they were supposed to do. They've done everything, they've met the criteria as far as making changes where they need to, and the judge will either take the recommendation and release them back to school, or not and they're back here another semester

Sgt. Sid insisted that he was not the principal, but stipulated that if a boot school student misbehaved they did not have the option of going to see the alternative school principal Thomas. Rather, the student had to deal directly with Sgt. Sid. If the sergeant could not correct the misbehavior in-house,

We go to the courthouse, and we get their PO (parole officer) involved, or we get the judge involved and that kind of thing. This is kind of the last chance for a lot of these guys to stay here in the camp. Beyond this it's placement in like a group home.

Some students, however, only attend boot school for short periods of time, such as a day or even just a morning. I observed what appeared to be an elementary-age student and a middle-school age student performing non-stop jumping jacks outside the office window while I conversed with Sgt. Sid. I actually worried that he had forgotten they were out there, and my suspicions were confirmed when the elementary student became overheated and vomited on the carpet outside Sgt. Sid's office.

Well, did he just throw up on my dad-gone carpet? [to Coach Jody] Is that the first student to throw up on our new carpet? I believe it is. [paused to delegate cleanup duties, then addressed the crying student] It's alright, son, it happens. Go sit over there and cool off and get yourself a drink. [to middle school student, who had erroneously paused in his jumping jacks] Carry on, boy.

Without missing a beat, the sergeant returned to his lengthy narrative depicting events leading up to a typical visit to boot school for what he labeled as “short-term remediation.”

These two here are ones from the middle school, and one is from one of our elementary schools. Being disruptive, cutting class; this kid here was making rude comments about women yesterday was when this happened. But this morning they got in trouble for something else. We've got a thing set up with the schools, because we've got a resource officer in all the schools, if the discipline, instead of suspending him or setting him out in the hall, they get a little consequence. This morning, at lunch time, when we go to lunch they'll either go back to the school site, or, like this young man here is going to do the rest of his day in our short-term remediation and it's just kind of like, you know, you can't be saying stuff like that about women without consequences. Cause a lot of these, you know, they're pretty savvy when it comes to the system. If I go get in trouble then I can go sit down and the office all day, and listen to what's going on, and draw, and whatever, or they're gonna send me home, and heck, that's where I want to be to start with. I don't want to be here. You know, we get a little consequence out of it, they get their morning ruined, basically, then they go on about their business. They don't go in the system, they don't get involved with the juvenile authority and that kind of thing, it's just kind of a, you did this, here we go. We get the parents to sign saying that they know they're gonna come over and exercise, and I'm going to sternly talk with them or whatever, and if they don't sign it, well, then they go another route.

### **Summary**

Truman Alternative Academy was a well-funded educational institution that, because of the huge therapeutic component they offered to the students, aggressively pursued all different sources of capital. The staff and teachers diligently cared for the needs of both the old building the academy was housed in and the students educated and cared for within. The student participants both stated the school was “comfortable” and “small,” while student and teacher

participants all noted that students receive lots of attention, and issues were usually dealt with one-on-one by either teachers or the five therapeutic counselors. The teacher and counselor participants mentioned that teachers and staff met regularly to sit down and brainstorm unique solutions to individual student's needs. Finally, the executive director and counselors observed about the importance of instituting a culture of acceptance and proper behavior, observing that teachers and students alike will gently reprimand each other when something is done in a manner that is "not the Truman way."

Cleveland Alternative Academy was the story of an award-winning alternative school fallen on hard times. Budget cuts, mass staff egression and reassignment, and a forced change in the school culture seem to have damaged, but not destroyed the group psyche of this school. The present staff and teachers as a group were perceived to be resigned to making the best of a bad situation. They nevertheless appeared to be true professionals, maintaining a good rapport and affinity with the students, and provided for the students' needs as best as they could considering the scant resources delegated to them from the school district. The staff seemed to be in agreement about alternative school discipline policies being very similar to the mainstream high school, with the caveat that for lesser infractions the Cleveland teachers and staff would sometimes substitute a one-on-one staffing with the students as instead of automatically assigning a prescribed consequence. Students and staff agreed that good relationships between staff and students reduced the number of discipline incidents. Students and teachers concurred that suspensions did not deter poor behavior, and that students needed to be at school getting their education rather than hanging out at home or on the streets.

Adams Alternative Academy served 90 to 100 students on any given day, and enjoyed a full complement of 8 teachers who taught all the core subjects and a few electives. The school was adequately funded by the district, and the principal actively pursued grant opportunities in order to provide additional support for the students in the form of a DHS staff member and additional education opportunities in the evenings and summer. Staff participants felt discipline

in their district was evolving and becoming more flexible, and mentioned that discipline was definitely not black and white at Adams. Student and staff participants agreed that discipline incidents too easily turned into a power struggle between administrators and students, and these incidents should be addressed calmly and individually on a case by case basis. Staff interviewees perceived suspension to be a factor which placed students at-risk of dropping out, and felt it stigmatized students; student participants agreed that too much separation from school negatively impacted students' attitudes toward school. The students' main concern focused on what they perceived as excessive consequences for tardies.

Chapter 4 contained a report of findings from the formal interviews, as well as additional data gathered from incidental conversations had with students and staff while touring the schools. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study, the results, the relationship of the results to theory, and the conclusions drawn from the results. It concludes with recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and some final thoughts.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Summary**

Only about 5 percent of school suspensions are for bringing dangerous weapons or drugs into school, while the other 95 percent are the result of general “disruptive behavior” (Losen, 2011). The widespread use of zero tolerance discipline policies for relatively small misdeeds such as fighting, truancy, and disrespect negatively impacts student achievement, as students suspended even a single time are more likely to become repeat offenders, to dropout, to attend a dropout recovery alternative school, and/or enter the juvenile justice system (Skiba and Peterson, 1999). These harsh school discipline policies and practices practically push students out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Students who are not in school are on the streets, and, more often than not, get into more serious trouble than they would at school (Weissman, 2009).

Legislators wrote the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) with intention of making schools safer by mandating strict school discipline policies that required expulsion for weapons possession (Martin, 2000). The passage of the GFSA caused the number of student suspensions and expulsions to dramatically increase, and subsequently caused an explosion in the number of alternative schools created as a means to deal with the ever increasing numbers of students excluded from mainstream school. Most school administrators interpreted the Act in a much broader sense than the legislators who sponsored the GFSA intended, applying harsh, mandatory expulsion consequences for lesser offenses (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Sweeten, 2006). These

exclusionary discipline practices—suspension, expulsion, referral to alternative school or the juvenile justice system—have had a “push-out” effect that quietly encouraged students to drop out of school and into the juvenile justice system, in what has come to be known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Brownstein, 2010). The application of these strict policies negatively impacted student achievement, and the ever-increasing numbers of suspensions and expulsions have not proven to significantly improve school safety (Ashford, 2000). Therefore, a better understanding of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline approaches is needed, as well as discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, and to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting. Research was focused on gathering perceptions of current discipline practices and possible alternatives from the perspectives of the population in transit, so to speak, on the “school-to-prison pipeline”; the students and staff in alternative school settings.

This study was guided by two research questions. The first question explored alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround current zero-tolerance discipline approaches. The second question investigated participant suggestions for discipline alternatives that did not remove or exclude students from the school setting.

Yin (2003) stated the case study is “the preferred research strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are posed, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 1). Case study was appropriate for this study because the researcher had no control over the discipline strategies administered by school districts, and because the researcher posed “how” and “why” questions concerning the contemporary phenomenon of the unexpected repercussions of zero tolerance discipline policies. Data were collected through the use of observation, informal and conversational interviews,

quotations from formal interviews, follow up telephone interviews, email communication, and excerpts from literature that participants suggested were read to better understand the problem.

## **Results**

The alternative schools and the students in this study deal with a negative image. Teachers at Central and Adams regretted that alternative schools were seen as the “bad kid” schools. Principal Terry remarked “a lot of kids think they’re lesser of a student or lesser of a person if they’re here, and that just kills me.”

Both the alternative schools studied and their students are hindered by a lack of money. Most alternative school students receive free and reduced lunches because of their low socioeconomic status, many live below the poverty line, and 25% of the students at Adams were homeless at any given point in time. The alternative schools struggle with money as well. None of the schools in this study had functioning kitchens a year ago, and food was shuttled in from other locations. This year Truman got a new kitchen because they wrote a grant and called it a “kitchen classroom”; Central was allowed to remodel their kitchen, but received no budget for kitchen staff, so they must still shuttle food in; and Adams still has no functioning kitchen.

Alternative school students are often transient and have challenging home situations. It is not uncommon for a student to attend multiple schools, sometimes moving to a different home and school district in the middle of the night. This impacts the students’ attendance, and creates gaps in their education. Students often come from homes with a history of addiction in the family, and in these families education is not a priority. Lacking parental support, the children are often saddled with grown-up responsibilities like cooking and taking care of siblings. Their need to provide food and shelter for themselves and their family creates preoccupation during the school day, and these underlying factors and the accompanying stress can cause the students to act out as a defense mechanism.

Administrators, teachers, and students at all three schools unanimously agreed that zero tolerance discipline and automatic suspension was appropriate if a student brought a gun to

school. Knives, other weapons, and drugs were noticeably absent from the groups' response to this question. When probed further, participants generalized their response to accepting zero tolerance discipline as appropriate if a student is endangering themselves or others. All student participants at both Adams and Central had been involved in fighting at school, and strongly opposed automatic suspension for the student who was defending himself in the fight. Teachers and counselors at all three schools were markedly against zero tolerance discipline for students caught using drugs, alcohol, or tobacco. The consensus opinion was to allow the student to remain in school and require them to attend in-house therapy and counseling sessions.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of suspensions varied in this study. The principal at a teacher at Adams suspected that discipline too often becomes a power struggle between student and administrator, then resulting in suspension for disrespect. Students remarked that suspending a student for absences and tardies was a punishment out of proportion to the offense, with Nick at Truman joking, "I thought it was funny, because I didn't go to school, so they would kick me out of school." Principal Thomas at Central confessed he suspended students for assault situations, but complained that zero tolerance policies "boxes administrators in" and gives them no options. All adult participants agreed that suspending a student—both in-school and out-of-school—pulls them away from direct instruction and sacrifices the best interest of the student. All participants agreed that long term suspensions did not achieve consistent results; some students were shamed and improved their behavior, while other students became angrier and more disruptive upon return to school. Principals and counselors at Truman and Cleveland deemed short term suspensions effective only because they gave everyone involved a "time-out" or break from each other, separated the student from their friends, and separated the student from their student body audience. Students at all three schools, however, found short term suspensions effective, responding that out-of-school suspensions effectively separated them from all their friends who were at school. Although Alan, a student at Adams, described in-school suspension as "agonizing," students overall preferred short term in-school suspensions because they could focus



and get lots of homework done, and they were still connected with the school and could see their friends before school and sometimes at lunch.

All alternative school participants in this study, both adult and student, preferred the small school atmosphere over the large school atmosphere. Student participants found the mainstream high school loud, busy, and chaotic, noting that fights were frequent, infractions went unnoticed, and the sheer number of students and the noise level emboldened students to, in Alex's words, "go crazy and wild." Students labeled a small school as being a comfortable, family environment where the teachers were laid-back, listened to students, and where everybody knew everybody. Teachers and counselors indicated that students felt lost and nameless at the large high school; discipline was much easier at a small school because students were not able to be anonymous troublemakers. Teachers and counselors at all schools emphasized they were able to closely monitor students in a smaller school setting. Nick from Cleveland shared that when a student got in trouble at a large school, few other students found out about it; but when a student was disciplined in a small school, everybody found out about it, and the incident served as an example for the whole school. Adult participants assumed that large school administrators were forced to deal out swift justice in discipline due simply to the sheer numbers of incidents they had to deal with daily, whereas at a small school the teachers and staff have more time to listen to students and look at individual circumstances. All students in the study appreciated that at the small alternative school when a student misbehaved they were usually sat down, talked to, and given a warning; whereas at the large schools they felt they were swiftly punished with a predetermined consequence by a person who sometimes did not even know their name. Principal Laura from Truman added that large schools tend to deal with behavior after it happens, while small schools take the time to focus more on preventing incidents from happening.

The staff at the alternative schools in this study focused on listening to the students and dealing with individual needs. The entire staff at all three schools met regularly—usually weekly—to discuss each of the students. They anticipated problems, and brainstormed ways to

meet each individual student's needs. "All of these kids out here who have these needs; for example, the need to have somebody to talk to, and the need to have somebody understand what they are dealing with" reported principal Laura at Truman. Teachers at all three schools agreed that students were easier to control if the students had someone they could respect and who would listen to them. Most alternative school students had not been taught ways of coping with the trauma inherent in their daily lives, so character education was informally taught through individual and group counseling and mediation—a major component of all the schools in this study. Teachers and counselors maintained the peace by sitting students down in mediation meetings, and there equipped them with words to use and methods of coping. Counselor Marcy from Truman explained that students were shown how to "sit down and work out their differences like civilized human beings, so nobody has to go home and we can all return to class."

All adults interviewed believed suspension should be used as a very last resort, should be short-term, and the student should always be aware that they may return. "It's not," as Mark from Truman explained, "go away forever! It's do this, and come back." Suspended students at Truman are told it is their behavior that is the problem, not them, and that they can always reapply if they complete the therapy or other treatment requested. Cleveland students are circled through all options within the system—evening school, short-term remediation, individual meetings with the counselor, boot school—before they are suspended as a very last option. Adams administrators extended a "rope of hope" to suspended students, keeping them linked to the school by enrolling them in night school, summer school, or service learning.

Ideas for discipline alternatives that did not remove or exclude students from school were varied. A major theme that did emerge from the data was that most students did not want to be suspended, and most students seemed to feel an innate need to perform acts of contrition in order to repair any harm caused by their behavior. Principal Karen from Adams Academy identified this need and this process as restorative justice, and portrayed it as a process in which offenders worked to restore those who have been injured by the behavior. Student participants suggested

multiple ways of repairing the harm caused by their behavior, such as: sitting down and apologizing to a teacher; cleaning lunchroom tables; picking up trash on the school grounds; agreeing to an extended school day in the form of morning, evening, or night school; working as an aide at after school activities; doing extra work by helping out in the office or library; or attending voluntary counseling sessions to help them learn to deal with their anger.

Adult participants at all three schools mentioned the importance of an adequate counseling contingent, with Adams and Cleveland schools recognizing that they did not have enough counselors on staff. Truman had a registrar who handled scheduling and testing duties, effectively freeing a counselor from those obligations; Karen from Adams was very candid about how wasteful she thought it was to squander a counselor's expertise on scheduling and paperwork, when they could be addressing students' needs. Karen complained that waiting until high school to identify at-risk students left counselors relatively little time to intervene and accommodate needs. She proposed identifying at-risk students earlier, even as early as elementary school, so that teachers and administrators could take preventative measures to address these students' needs on a timelier basis.

### **Relationship of Results to Theory**

Because the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, as well as to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting, several contemporary discipline models were used to frame this study. These models were referenced to describe present perspectives of zero-tolerance discipline policies, and were employed to frame participants' suggested discipline alternatives.

Maslow (1943) in his Hierarchy of Needs posited that if a person's basic physiological and safety needs are not met, the individual feels anxious and tense. Applied to the school setting, this means that if a child's deficiency needs are not met, it unlikely the student will be

able to focus on his studies. Alternative school students are often preoccupied with where their next meal is coming from, or where they are going to sleep that night. Many students are saddled with parental responsibilities, and are preoccupied with the care of their siblings, their own children, or even the care of their parents. This preoccupation with basic needs takes students' attention away from their studies, and when stress levels get too high causes them to act out and misbehave. Alternative schools struggle with basic needs as well, and often seek additional funding to take care of the students' educational needs.

Redl and Wattenberg (1959) addressed the concept that people in groups behave differently than they do individually. Redl and Wattenberg encouraged teachers to anticipate certain behaviors; be ready to handle a ripple effect of undesirable behaviors from the other members of the group; investigate the incident and participants in depth; and finally resolve the situation. The major disadvantage of the model is that it is unrealistic to expect teachers in secondary schools to have the time to carry out in-depth diagnoses of students' needs with the large numbers of students under their care. Results of this study indicate that the smaller number of students in a small school setting allows administrators and staff to better investigate students' needs and anticipate these student misbehaviors.

Skinner's discipline model was found not to apply in the alternative school setting. Skinner (1971) demonstrated behavior could be shaped along desired lines with the proper, systematic application of reinforcement. Skinner stated reinforcement can be positive (receiving candy as a reward) or negative (getting out of a test by successfully telling a lie), but either of these reinforcements will strengthen the behavior and cause it to be repeated. No participant in this study mentioned students behaving in a certain manner in order to receive a reward or other reinforcer. However, I observed that Truman staff encouraged art students to paint colorful murals on the wall, and teachers at Adams printed out student work and accomplishments and taped them to the walls. I also noticed that principals and staff placed their own personal reinforcers of awards, diplomas and certifications on their office and classroom walls.

Ginott (1971) provided strategies to build classroom discipline through open communication. He believed students learn through trial-and-error; therefore, if a teacher responds in an understanding manner when a child makes a mistake, the child will be more willing to continue learning and experiencing. He showed how discipline can be more effective if administered through small, gentle steps rather than tough and strong tactics. Ginott discouraged the use of punishment, believing that by focusing on the situation—not the student—and by finding alternative means for discipline besides punishment, the teacher can make discipline in the classroom a learning experience for all students. Adult participants at all schools were understanding about student missteps in behavior, and never used tough and strong tactics. All school staff members had a shared goal of focusing on situations, and focused on the needs hidden behind a student's behavior, rather than the behavior itself.

Kounin's (1977) discipline model focused on reducing behavior incidents through the use of effective lesson management, lesson pacing, and student accountability. Kounin claimed maintaining the momentum of a lesson and challenging students with a variety of activities will improve classroom behavior. No participant in this study mentioned these factors as affecting discipline at the alternative school level. However, Kounin also referenced the ripple effect by encouraging teachers to give public encouragements and reprimands to the disruptive student. He felt all students react to the encouragements and reprimands—not just the disruptive student. Students in this study did note that due to the small size of the school, discipline incidents rippled out to the entire population, so that everyone was aware of the event and its consequences. Finally, Kounin emphasized the importance of “with-it-ness,” or being able to know what is going on in all areas of the classroom at all times. Kounin found that if students perceive the teacher to be “with it” they are less likely to misbehave. Teachers, counselors, and administrators in this study pointed out repeatedly that they monitor students much more closely at the alternative school, a “with-it” technique made easier by the small size of the school.

Glasser (1977) insisted that children choose misbehavior—nothing forces them to behave as they do. He contended that since bad behavior is a choice, it is a teacher's duty to show students how to make good choices. Adult participants in this study stressed again and again how they talked to students one-on-one, worked to discover the need or reason behind a behavior, and then showed the students coping skills they could use, and together with the student explored choices the student could make given their individual situation. A disadvantage often stated about Glasser's model was that in reality it is difficult to diagnose student needs during a relatively short class period, but again adult participants in this study credited the small school structure with allowing them the time needed to investigate individual situations.

Canter's Assertive Discipline model (1978) was found in most respects not to apply to the participants in this study. Canter showed teachers a corrective discipline model that stressed speaking and acting in an assertive manner while remaining calm, firmly neutral, and businesslike. Adult participants in this study spoke in a confident and friendly tone to students and remained calm at all times, but were never aggressive or assertive in tone of voice. Assertive or demanding attitudes coming from adults tend to awaken defense mechanisms and invoke rebellion on the part of an at-risk student. Canter stressed that teachers show no bias when following the established discipline plan; any student who breaks the rule must pay the price. The model encouraged a one-size-fits-all discipline method that did not guide teachers to better understand children and the underlying causes for their misbehavior. Alternative school participants in this study shied away from one-size-fits-all discipline philosophies, and focused instead on individualized discipline strategies for each unique student.

Dreikurs (Dreikurs & Pepper, 1982) believed discipline is not punishment. He identified true discipline as synonymous with self-discipline, and encouraged showing students how to impose limits on themselves. Dreikurs organized teachers into autocratic teachers who force their will on the class in order to control the class, permissive teachers who generate problem behavior because the classroom atmosphere they create is not based on everyday reality, and democratic

teachers who establish rules and consequences, and provide firm guidance and leadership. Students in a democratic classroom were free to choose behavior, because they understood that consequences followed their choice of behavior, and understanding consequences helps students develop inner control. Results of this study imply at-risk students have difficulty with self-control, due to factors outside of school that they are dealing with. Adult participants pointed out the power of choices at an alternative school. Students choose to attend—with the exception of Cleveland—and students are guided and counseled daily toward making positive choices for each situation they may encounter, so that they may improve their inner control.

Albert (1999) extended Dreikurs' ideas in her book *Cooperative Discipline*. Cooperative discipline establishes a partnership between students, teachers, and parents. Albert believed that student behavior is based on choice, students need a sense of belonging, and that students misbehave for specific reasons. Teachers are expected to exhibit great self-control in the midst of misbehavior, conducting themselves with a business-like attitude. Albert stressed that students choose their behavior, and the teacher has power to influence, but not control, their choices. The Cooperative Discipline model assumes that students will misbehave again unless they are shown strategies to choose appropriate behavior. Adult participants in this study described common situations in which they or another teacher exhibited self-control in the face of sometimes loud and abusive student behavior. Mark from Truman summed it up when he explained that at the alternative school, teachers are more likely to be aware of the underlying causes of poor behavior, “so if I see behavior in the classroom that is anger, I am not taking that as something that is personal—I am taking that as somebody having a really crappy day because of something else that is going on in their life.” As in the Dreikurs' model, adult participants in this study counseled the students and helped them discover appropriate strategies to deal with and control their behavior.

Kohn's discipline model (Kohn, 1996) challenged widely accepted discipline theories and practices and is controversial in its de-emphasis on the power of praise and common

classroom management practices. Kohn felt that to the extent teachers want to teach the importance of making an effort, praise really is not required at all. Kohn complained that teachers who use praise as part of their classroom management strategy are more interested in student compliance rather than teaching a student how to become a problem-solver. The results of this study seem to support Kohn's model in that (as noted in Skinner's model) praise and reward practices were never mentioned by any participant as a means of controlling behavior or of gaining student compliance. Kohn summarized his model by advising teachers to focus on "working with" students instead of controlling them by "doing to" them, and professing, "Children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions" (Kohn, 2005, p. 22). All participants in this study, student and adult alike, confirmed that counselors and teachers work with students to counsel them and aid them in making positive choices.

To summarize, discipline models from Redl and Wattenberg, Skinner, Kounin, and Canter in most respects did not apply to the alternative school situation. All of the remaining discipline models contained some elements that pertained to this venue, but the model that best applied to the alternative school setting was Glasser's. His model—with a nod to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs—emphasized addressing the unmet needs behind a student's behavior, and stressed cooperation between teacher and student, giving students a voice in rules and consequences. All adult participants at all alternative schools in this study consistently talked one-on-one with misbehaving students in order to diagnose and address the underlying needs behind their behaviors.

### **Conclusions**

In conducting this study, I wanted to understand perceptions of zero tolerance discipline from the viewpoint of the students and educators most involved with its repercussions. In addition, I wanted to collect ideas from this alternative school population about how to discipline students without suspending or otherwise excluding them from school. As a result of the



interviews and data collected I have made several specific conclusions about the factors surrounding zero tolerance discipline.

Zero tolerance discipline does not need to be eliminated, as current research, backed by sometimes startling statistics, seems to suggest. Students and adults alike want to feel safe at school, and all agreed that a person who is an imminent physical or mental threat to themselves or others should be immediately physically removed from the general school population. However, students and staff do not consider fighting, tardies, and possession of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco to be an imminent threat. Zero tolerance discipline is indeed used by administrators far too readily for these lesser offenses. The one-size-fits-all consequence of automatic suspension is convenient and aids administrators in dealing quickly and efficiently with the numerous discipline incidents that occur daily within a large school. Principals at mainstream high schools are forced to deal out swift justice and do not, in most cases, have to answer to anybody or justify their decisions. The staff at alternative schools, in contrast, deals more effectively with a student's misbehavior through group staff meetings in which all stakeholders have a say about what consequences are appropriate for each unique incident. The group staffing shares the responsibility and takes the power out of one person's hands.

Out-of-school suspension is an unreliable method of disciplining students; it should be phased out as a punishment. Some students are shamed when disciplined with out-of-school suspension, and alter their behavior accordingly. But other students consider it a badge of honor, enjoy their time off from school, and upon their return to school are quick to get in trouble again. Therefore, out-of-school suspension effectively impacts behavior for only a part of the student population. In Karen from Adam's words, "kids need supervision and education; out-of-school suspension serves neither."

In-school suspension can be used effectively as a discipline method as long as it is used as a last resort. In-school suspension practices are effective as long as they are short-term, allow the student to continue their education, and permit the student to maintain some connection with

the school. In-school suspension should only be used after the student has been circled through all other discipline alternatives in the system first.

Dealing with at-risk students' issues requires a special brand of teacher and administrator. Mainstream educators, although they may be efficient and effective in their particular mainstream education arena, do not have the background or the coping skills needed to manage an at-risk student's sometimes explosive and defiant behavior. At-risk students' unique backgrounds and challenging home situations often cause them to act out at school, and this misbehavior is inappropriately addressed by inexperienced mainstream teachers and administrators.

At-risk students feel more comfortable in a smaller school environment where they know everybody and can develop relationships with students and adults alike. As a result, they behave better and thus lower the number of discipline incidents. At-risk students appear to crave the attention and the element of family that is characteristically missing in their lives, and perform better academically and socially in these smaller school environments. The students desire the personal attention of someone who will listen to them, accept them unconditionally, and understand what it is they are going through.

Finally, at-risk students accept discipline consequences more readily if there is a relationship of mutual respect between the students and adults, and if the students have some input, or choice, in discipline alternatives. At-risk students often feel powerless due to the situation they are in and the cards they have been dealt in life. These students desire a choice in their destiny. They want warnings before discipline is administered, so that they have the choice to behave better if they wish. When they misbehave, most students regret the effect of their actions, and innately desire to repair any harm their behavior has done. The practice of making reparations for any harm done has recently been termed "restorative justice practices." Students are willing to perform these acts of contrition, and they desire choices in how best to accomplish this.

In summary, schools must adapt and update their discipline policies to better address the

needs of at-risk students. I believe the results of this study imply that students are fundamentally good. They misbehave when their basic needs have not been met. If the parent cannot or will not address these needs, then—like it or not—these responsibilities fall to the schools. Don from Truman summed this philosophy up in his own unique way, “There ain’t no child just going to be acting rude for nothing—there’s always a reason behind it.” At the root of every student misbehavior is an unaddressed need.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The conclusions of this study lead to recommendations that could aid mainstream high schools. Out-of-school suspensions were found to be an effective deterrent in only some of the discipline incidents discussed in this study. The following recommendations, developed from this qualitative study of alternative high schools, could prove useful at the mainstream high school level in addressing discipline incidents in a manner more productive for the student.

Automatic out-of-school suspension is a drastic consequence that negatively impacts a student’s education. It should only be reserved for the most extreme discipline incidents in which a student is an imminent danger or threat to themselves or others. School administrators should set a yearly goal of zero out-of-school suspensions for all non-weapon related offenses. School administrators should redefine a weapon as an instrument brought onto school grounds by a student who has the intent to cause harm to themselves or others. Therefore, pocket knives, baseball bats, nail clippers, etc., brought to school by a student should not automatically be considered weapons until the student’s intent has been determined. If there is no intent to harm, then the student does not need to be removed from the classroom. All other discipline incidents like fighting, tardies, and possession of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco—formerly handled by zero tolerance out-of-school suspension—should be addressed in-house using a combination of counseling, therapy, and restorative justice practices such as written apologies, cleaning lunch tables, picking up trash, and the like.

Establishing a culture of choice in the school is essential with the at-risk population.

Administrators, counselors, and students should work together to develop choices in discipline for students by promoting restorative justice practices. This gives the student a voice in discipline, allows them an opportunity to make up for any harm their behavior has caused, and does not separate the student from the school setting. Some examples of restorative justice practices are listed below.

- talk circles: affected students and staff sit in a circle to talk about issues and resolve conflicts
- mediation: a trained mediator brings two students together to resolve disputes
- conferencing: similar to mediation, but opens the process to other students, staff, and teachers
- peer jury: student volunteers, under the supervision of an adult coordinator, hear cases of minor delinquent acts or school offenses, offer guidance and support to the referred student, and with the student develop an agreement that outlines actions needed by the student in order to repair the harm caused by their behavior

At-risk students require a large counseling component to effectively deal with these students' needs. The alternative schools in this study appeared to successfully manage students' counseling needs by providing one counselor for every 10 or 12 at-risk students. Administrators at mainstream schools should learn to identify the number of at-risk students in their school, and explore ways of making counseling and therapy more available to this special population. Administrators should note that assigning scheduling and testing duties to a secretary will effectively free up an additional counselor at a minimal cost to the district.

At-risk students are easily identifiable due to unique characteristics such as transience, absenteeism, and challenging home backgrounds; thus, schools should take steps as early as elementary school to identify at-risk students and place them with an at-risk teacher specialist. This rings of special education, but it is only special education in that it applies to dealing with

the special needs of a student of normal intelligence who unfortunately is handicapped by a challenging home situation in which there is little parental support. These students have been handicapped by gaps in curricular education, gaps in character education, and gaps in emotional coping mechanisms, all of which need to be addressed by a specialist trained in these areas. To this end, as schools identify at-risk students through repeated discipline incidents, administration should regularly make a change in the student's placement at the school in order to provide these students with the attention they crave. These at-risk students should be placed into progressively smaller class units, with teachers specially trained to deal with at-risk students, and with more access to counselors, until the student is in a place where they can feel safe, accepted, and able to concentrate and make progress both emotionally and academically.

At-risk students feel more comfortable in a smaller family-like environment where they know everybody, and as a result they behave better and thus lower the number of discipline incidents. Administrators should explore a cycle of discipline in which at-risk students are identified and then reassigned to smaller classroom environments that separate them from the distractions and anonymity inherent in a large school system, possibly even as a discipline alternative that the student could choose. These smaller environments should have classrooms of, again, only 10 to 12 students, and the teachers should be specially trained to deal with the acting-out behaviors they will frequently encounter.

Finally, administrators need to instill a culture of caring in their school environment. Teachers should be practiced in the art of displaying unconditional acceptance, using techniques like making eye contact and greeting each student when they walk in the classroom, smiling and letting the student know they are happy to see them, or simply by asking them, "How are you doing today?" Taking the time to develop these relationships with students ensures there will be fewer discipline problems later on.

At the root of every behavior appears to be an unaddressed need. Administrators need to recognize this and provide for these needs, rather than rushing to suspend a student and push

them away from the herd. Suspension is an easy way to quickly remove a problem student from the school setting—but the last thing these at-risk students need is to be isolated from what may be the only real family they have.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This qualitative study explored perceptions of the factors that surround zero tolerance discipline policies and practices, and identified discipline alternatives that did not remove or exclude students from the school setting. However, there were other areas of consideration not included in this study. Further study of factors that surround alternative school education is recommended.

The first recommendation is to explore the reasons alternative schools, as a whole, are so poorly funded. All schools in this study were housed in hand-me-down elementary schools, and all schools spent many years without a functioning kitchen or kitchen staff. All participants found therapeutic counselors to be essential to the operation of the alternative school, yet the school districts that Adams and Cleveland belonged to only provided one counselor for the whole school. It is curious that a school district would assign such a high maintenance population to such lowly maintained and underfunded school sites.

A second recommendation is to explore the area of restorative justice practices. This term arose from an interview at Adams, but did not occur in the data from Cleveland or Truman. The principal at Adams explained restorative justice practices to be any actions a student takes to repair the harm his behavior may have caused others. This subject bears further inspection as it seems to parallel Dreikurs' model of discipline as being a learning experience rather than strictly a punishment.

### **Final Thoughts**

To borrow the analogy of *The Three Bears*, Truman Alternative Academy had more money than they needed, Cleveland Alternative Academy was severely underfunded and understaffed, and Adams Academy appeared to have funding and support that was “just right.”

Cleveland Academy was the story of a state-recognized award-winning school that had fallen on hard times. Their board of education slashed their budget, reassigned their teachers, and changed their mission—effectively crippling a formerly stellar school. I wonder if this study will inadvertently serve as a doomsday warning to all alternative schools, in effect alerting their administrators to how dangerously close any alternative school is to the brink of extinction. Alternative education apparently serves at the pleasure of each particular board of education, and faced with a budget crunch it appears that alternative education has joined music, drama, and art as one of the first to be considered when it is time to cut expenses.

Truman seems exempt from this fate since they employ a full-time grant writer and seek so many outside funding sources. If their district funding were cut, they could survive, if not flourish, due to these sources. Adams is similar in size to Truman, but is apparently one budget cut away from being in the same boat as Cleveland. While I applaud Truman for employing a full-time grant writer, I question an educational system that so minimally and impermanently funds a school. I advise all alternative school administrators, especially in these poor economic times, to secure the services of a full-time grant writer. The only way to guarantee survival in this economy is to ensure multiple streams of income into your school.

I was struck time and time again by the professionalism of all the staff at each alternative school. Whether the school was going through good times or bad, each staff member smiled frequently, maintained optimistic outlooks, and cultivated positive relationships with all the students. I was truly impressed at how seriously, and yet joyfully, each staff member worked at their vocation. No one complained or expressed worry about money or funding—truly their main concern was only for their students' wellbeing. I feel honored to have made their acquaintance.

## REFERENCES

- Adam, A. (2000). The status of school discipline and violence. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 567, 140-156.
- Albert, L. (1999). *A Teacher's Guide to Cooperative Discipline: How to Manage Your Classroom and Promote Self Esteem*. Pine Circles, MN: American Guidance Service.
- American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force. (2008). Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, 63(9), 852-862.
- Aron, L. Y. (2006). *An Overview of Alternative Education*. The Urban Institute: Washington, DC.
- Ashford, R. (2000). Can zero tolerance keep our schools safe? *Principal*, 28-30.
- Ashley, J., & Burke, K. (2012). *Implementing restorative justice: A guide for schools*. Chicago, IL: Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. Retrieved from <http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/BARJ/SCHOOL%20BARJ%20GUIDEBOOOK>
- Atkins, M., McKay, M., Frazier, S., Jakobsons, L., Arvanitis, P., Cunningham, T., Brown, K., & Lambrecht, L. (2002). Suspensions and detentions in an urban, low-income school: Punishment or reward? *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 30(4), 361-371.
- Brownstein, R. (2010). Pushed out. *Education Digest*, 75(7), 23-27.
- Canter, L. (1978). Be an assertive teacher. *Instructor*, 88(60).
- Canter, L. (1994). *Scared or prepared: Preventing conflict and violence in your classroom*. Santa Monica, CA: Lee Canter and Associates.



- Carswell, S., Hanlon, T., O'Grady, K., Watts, A., & Pothong, P. (2009). A Preventive Intervention Program for Urban African American Youth Attending an Alternative Education Program: Background, Implementation, and Feasibility. *Education & Treatment of Children, 32*(3), 445-469. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2<sup>nd</sup>ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- D'Angelo, F., & Zemanick, R. (2009). The Twilight Academy: An Alternative Education Program That Works. *Preventing School Failure, 53*(4), 211-218. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- de la Ossa, P. (2005). Hear My Voice: Alternative High School Students' Perceptions and Implications for School Change. *American Secondary Education, 34*(1), 24-39. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Devine, J. (1996). *Maximum security: The culture of violence in inner city schools*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dreikurs, R. (1968). *Psychology in the classroom* (2<sup>nd</sup>ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Dugger, J., & Dugger, C. (1998). An evaluation of a successful alternative high school. *High School Journal, 81*(4), 218. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Fallis, R., & Opatow, S. (2003). Are students failing school or are schools failing students? Class cutting in high school. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(1), 103-119.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2006). Synopsis of crime in schools and colleges: *A study of national incidence-based reporting system (NCIBRS) data*. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Justice. Retrieved from <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/schoolviolence.pdf>
- Feierman, J., Levick, M., & Mody, A. (2009). The school-to-prison pipeline...and back: Obstacles and remedies for the re-enrollment of adjudicated youth. *New York School Law Review, 54*, 1115-1129.

- Foley, R., & Pang, L. (2006). Alternative education programs: Program and student characteristics. *The High School Journal*, 89(3), 10-21. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.apollolibrary.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=19584560&site=ehost-live>
- Ginott, H. (1971). *Teacher and child*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Glasser, W. (1977). *Schools without failure*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Kohn, A. (1996). *Beyond discipline: From compliance to community*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Kohn, A. (2005). Unconditional Teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 63(1), 20-24.
- Kohn, A. (2012). News and comments [web log comment]. Retrieved April 2, 2012 from [http://www.alfiekohn.org/f\\_news/fullnews.php?fn\\_id=5](http://www.alfiekohn.org/f_news/fullnews.php?fn_id=5)
- Kounin, J. (1971). *Discipline and group management in classrooms*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Livingston, A. (2006). *The condition of education 2006 in brief*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Loflin, J. (2000). *Alternative education's spoiled image: When it happened, how it happened, why it happened, and what to do about it?* Indianapolis: University of Indiana.
- Losen, D. (2011). *Discipline policies, successful schools, and racial justice*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved April 1, 2012, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/discipline-policies>.
- Martin, M. (2000). Does zero mean zero? *American School Board Journal*, 187(3), 39-41.
- Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review* 50(4), 370-96.
- Maslow, A. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: an interactive approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- McAndrews, T. (2001). *Zero Tolerance Policies*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED EDO-EA-01-03).
- Murphy, M. (2005). *The history and philosophy of education: Voices of educational pioneers*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, D. C.: US Department of Education.
- Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center. (2010). *Alternative academy programs*. [Fact Sheet]. Retrieved from <http://otac.info/OTAC%20Fact%20Sheet-jan2010.pdf>.
- Pinnegar, S., & Daynes, J. (2007). Locating narrative inquiry historically: Thematic in the turn to narratives. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.) *Handbook of narrative inquiry mapping a methodology* (pp. 3-34). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Powell, D. (2003). Demystifying Alternative Education: Considering What Really Works. *Reclaiming Children & Youth, 12*(2), 68. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Positive Behavior for Safe and Effective Schools Act of 2009, H. R. 2597, 111th Cong. (2009).
- Quinn, M., Poirier, J., Faller, S., Gable, R., & Tonelson, S. (2006). An Examination of School Climate in Effective Alternative Programs. *Preventing School Failure, 51*(1), 11-17. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Raywid, M. (1994). Alternative schools: The state of the art. *Educational Leadership, 52*(1), 26-31.
- Raywid, M. (1998). The journey of the alternative schools movement: Where it's been and where it's going. *The High School Magazine, 5*(2), 10-14.
- Redl, F. & Wattenberg, W. (1951). *Mental hygiene in teaching*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Reeder, R. (2005). Mainstream success following placement in a modified type II setting. (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest. (305431014).

- Richards, L. (2005). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide*. London, England: Sage.
- Riele, K. (2006). Schooling practices for marginalized students—practice—with—hope. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 10(1), 59-74. Retrieved from 108  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=19019542&site=ehost-live>
- Saunders, J., & Saunders, E. (2001). Alternative School Students' Perceptions of Past [Traditional] and Current [Alternative] School Environments. *High School Journal*, 85(2), 12. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Skiba, R., & Peterson, R. (1999). The dark side of zero tolerance: Can punishment lead to safe schools? *Phi Delta Kappa*, 80, 372-376.
- Skiba, R., Peterson, R., & Williams, T. (1997). Office referrals and suspension: Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 20, 295-315.
- Skiba, R., & Knesting, K. (2001). Zero tolerance, zero evidence: An analysis of school disciplinary practice. *New Directions for Youth Development: Theory, Practice and Research*, 92, 17-43.
- Skinner, B. (1971). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Stader, D. Preempting Threats with a Sound School Policy. *NASSP Bulletin*, 84, 617 (September 2000): 68-72.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sweeten, G. (2006): Who will graduate? Disruption of high school education by arrest and court involvement. *Justice Quarterly*, 23(4), 462-480. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07418820600985313>
- U. S. Census Bureau. (2010). State and County QuickFacts. Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/40000.html>

- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *Public alternative schools and programs for students at risk of education failure* (2000-01 statistical analysis report). Washington, DC: Author.
- U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs. (2011). *Attorney General Holder, Secretary Duncan announce effort to respond to school-to-prison pipeline by supporting good discipline practices*. Retrieved from <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2011/July/11-ag-951.html>
- Van Acker, R. (2007). Antisocial, aggressive, and violent behavior in children and adolescents within alternative education settings: Prevention and intervention. *Preventing School Failure, 51*(2), 5-12. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Wald, J., & Losen, D. (2003). *Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Web Center for Social Research Methods.(2006). *Qualitative validity*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualval.php>
- Weissman, M. (2008). The school to prison pipeline and criminalizing youth: Costs, consequences and alternatives. *The Link, 6*(4), 6 – 9, 15-17.
- Weissman, M. (2009). *Prelude to prison: Student perspectives on school suspension*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest. (760110381).
- Western, B. (2006). *Punishment and inequality in America*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Wiest, D., Wong, E., Cervantes, J., Craik, L., & Kreil, D. (2001). Intrinsic motivation among regular, special, and alternative education high school students. *Adolescence, 36*(14). 111-126.
- Yin, R. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zirkel, P. (1999). Zero tolerance expulsions. *NASSP Bulletin, 83*, 610: 101-105. EJ 597 055.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me a little bit about your alternative school and the students who attend it.
2. Please describe your school district's discipline policies and procedures.
3. Describe your school district's suspension/expulsion process, and how this process applies to students at this school.
4. What is your overall opinion of your school district's suspension/expulsion process?
5. Please describe some instances, if any, in which your school district applied zero-tolerance discipline approaches.
6. Which, if any, current zero-tolerance discipline approaches do you perceive as being appropriate? (In other words, under what circumstances do you think the punishment of suspension/expulsion fits the rule-breaking behavior?)
7. Which, if any, current zero-tolerance discipline approaches do you perceive as being inappropriate? (In other words, under what circumstances do you think the punishment of suspension/expulsion does not fit the rule-breaking behavior?)
8. How do you think being suspended affects a student's behavior upon return to school?
9. How do you think being suspended influences a student's future?
10. Describe any discipline alternatives that your school or other schools currently use to discipline students without suspending or expelling them from school?

## APPENDIX B

### LETTER OF REQUEST FOR SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

[Date]

Tim Kruse  
1201 S. Ransom Drive  
Stillwater, OK 74074

Dear [Superintendent Name]:

I am writing to ask your permission to conduct a research study at [district's alternative high school name]. I am an alternative education math teacher at Lincoln Alternative Academy in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and a doctoral candidate in Oklahoma State University's Educational Leadership Program. As part of this program, I will be conducting a research study to learn more about alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors surrounding zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and practices, as well as to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from school. I would like to interview the principal, two teachers, and two-to-four students at [district's alternative high school name]. The students asked to participate will be 18 years of age or older. I have chosen your school because it is one of three alternative high schools that have been awarded the annual Outstanding Achievement in Alternative Education Award from the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence. Below is some information to help you make an informed decision.

The interviews will take place at the school, and will consist of approximately eight to ten questions; these questions will be semi-structured to leave opportunities for participants to expand on questions in ways relevant to their experiences and opinions. The interview time will vary depending on the participant; however, interviews will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. I will digitally record each interview, and later I will transcribe the interview verbatim, except for replacing the participant's name with a pseudonym. I will email each participant a copy of his/her transcribed interview to check for accuracy. If I need clarification, I will email or phone participants. Participants will be assured of confidentiality. Field notes and transcripts will not contain personal identifiers. I will use pseudonyms for the schools, and will refer to the state by general location. No questions will require participants to mention a school employee or a specific incident in the home or at school. I may use quotations from individuals in my written document; however, nothing will be used that might identify the individual speaker. The participants will be encouraged to share their perceptions of the factors surrounding their school district's application of zero-tolerance discipline procedures, and will be asked to suggest discipline alternatives that do not remove students from the school setting. Withdrawal from the interview process is an available option without penalty. No penalty will exist for those who do not participate in the study and no explanation for refusal to participate will be required.

Participants may contact me or my dissertation advisor at the following addresses and phone numbers should they desire to discuss their participation in the study and/or request information

about the results of the study: Tim Kruse, 1201 S. Ransom Drive, Stillwater, OK, 74074, 405-334-7464, [tkruse@stillwaterschools.com](mailto:tkruse@stillwaterschools.com); or Dr. Bernita Krumm, 310 Willard Hall, Stillwater, OK, 74078, 405-744-9445.

I sincerely hope that you will allow me to conduct my research at your school. I will be contacting you via telephone or email in the near future to answer any questions you may have. Please do not hesitate to contact me at the above phone number or email if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Tim Kruse



## APPENDIX C

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM—PRINCIPALS

**Title:** Current zero-tolerance discipline approaches: Perspectives from exemplary alternative schools.

**Investigator:** Tim Kruse, candidate for an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership Studies for Oklahoma State University.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors surrounding zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and practices, and to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting. You are being asked to participate because as an alternative school principal, you daily come into contact with the factors surrounding zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and practices and will be able to offer your perspectives on disciplinary alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from school.

**What to Expect:** You will participate in a one-time formal interview with me. The interview will last 30 to 60 minutes. If I need clarification on your responses, I will contact you by email or phone. I will ask you to choose the location and time of the interview. During the interview, I will ask about your perceptions of the factors surrounding zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and practices, and I will ask you to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting. You may choose not to respond to any questions you feel are too personal or sensitive. I will mail you a copy of your interview for you to review.

**Risks:** There are no risks associated with this project that are expected to be greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**Benefits:** You may gain an appreciation and understanding of how research is conducted. You may also learn about disciplinary alternatives that other alternative schools use with successful results. Your participation may benefit student behavior and achievement at other alternative schools by adding to the knowledge base about discipline alternatives that do not exclude students from school.

**Compensation:** You will receive no monetary compensation for your participation.

**Your Rights:** Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty.

**Confidentiality:** All information about you will be kept confidential and will not be released. I will transcribe the data myself, so no one else will have access. Data collected will be identified by a pseudonym and referred to as such in the dissertation. Field notes and transcripts will not contain personal identifiers. I will use pseudonyms for the schools, and will refer to the state by general location. I may use quotations from you in my written document; however, nothing will

be used that might identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only I, my advisor, and research personnel at Oklahoma State University will have access to the records.

**Contacts:** You may contact me or my dissertation advisor at the following addresses and phone numbers, should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study: Tim Kruse, 1201 S. Ransom Drive, Stillwater, OK 74074, 405-334-7464; or Dr. Bernita Krumm, 310 Willard Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-9445. If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact Dr. Shelia Kennison, IRB Chair, 219 Cordell North, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu)

**Participant Rights:** I understand that my participation is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty.

**Consent documentation:** I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements:

I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

---

Signature of Researcher

---

Date

## APPENDIX D

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM—TEACHERS

**Title:** Current zero-tolerance discipline approaches: Perspectives from exemplary alternative schools.

**Investigator:** Tim Kruse, candidate for an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership Studies for Oklahoma State University.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors surrounding zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and practices, and to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting. You are being asked to participate because as an alternative school teacher, you daily come into contact with the factors surrounding zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and practices and will be able to offer your perspectives on disciplinary alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from school.

**What to Expect:** You will participate in a one-time formal interview with me. The interview will last 30 to 60 minutes. If I need clarification on your responses, I will contact you by email or phone. I will ask you to choose the location and time of the interview. During the interview, I will ask about your perceptions of the factors surrounding zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and practices, and I will ask you to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting. You may choose not to respond to any questions you feel are too personal or sensitive. I will mail you a copy of your interview for you to review.

**Risks:** There are no risks associated with this project that are expected to be greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**Benefits:** You may gain an appreciation and understanding of how research is conducted. You may also learn about disciplinary alternatives that other alternative schools use with successful results. Your participation may benefit student behavior and achievement at other alternative schools by adding to the knowledge base about discipline alternatives that do not exclude students from school.

**Compensation:** You will receive no monetary compensation for your participation.

**Your Rights:** Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty.

**Confidentiality:** All information about you will be kept confidential and will not be released. I will transcribe the data myself, so no one else will have access. Data collected will be identified by a pseudonym and referred to as such in the dissertation. Field notes and transcripts will not contain personal identifiers. I will use pseudonyms for the schools, and will refer to the state by general location. I may use quotations from you in my written document; however, nothing will



## APPENDIX E

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM—STUDENTS

**Title:** Current zero-tolerance discipline approaches: Perspectives from exemplary alternative schools.

**Investigator:** Tim Kruse, candidate for an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership Studies for Oklahoma State University.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research study is to explore your thoughts and feelings about how zero-tolerance discipline is being used in schools today. I would also like to hear your ideas about how to discipline students without suspending or expelling them from school. You are being asked to participate because as an alternative school student, you daily come into contact with students who have been suspended or expelled from school by an administrator who was applying a zero-tolerance discipline policy.

**What to Expect:** You will participate in a one-time formal interview with me. The interview will last 30 to 60 minutes. If I need clarification on your responses, I will contact you by email or phone. I will ask you to choose the location and time of the interview. Your principal and I will arrange a location and time for the interview at the school. During the interview, I will ask about your thoughts and feelings about how zero-tolerance discipline is being used in schools today. I would also like to hear your ideas about how to discipline students without suspending or expelling them from school. You do not have to answer any questions you feel are too personal or sensitive. I will mail you a copy of your interview for you to review.

**Risks:** There are no risks connected with this interview that are expected to be greater than those you would come across in your daily life.

**Benefits:** You may learn a little about how research is done. You may also learn how other alternative schools discipline students without suspending or expelling them from school. Your participation in this interview may help other alternative schools by showing them new ways of disciplining students without suspending or expelling these students from school.

**Compensation:** You will not be paid for your participation.

**Your Rights:** Your participation in this research is voluntary. It is okay if you do not wish to participate, and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

**Confidentiality:** All information about you will be kept confidential and will not be released. I will type out our interview myself, so no one else will hear or see your interview. I will give you a different name when I type out your interview, and will refer to you in my paper by this alias. Any notes I write down during our interview will not contain your real name. I will use an alias for your school name, and will refer to your state as “a state in the Midwest.” I may quote you in my paper; however, nothing will be used that might identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only I, my advisor, and research personnel at Oklahoma State University will have access to the records.



Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Friday, February 03, 2012  
IRB Application No ED1213  
Proposal Title: Non-Exclusionary Alternatives to Current Zero-Tolerance Discipline Approaches: Perspectives from Exemplary Alternative Schools  
Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 2/2/2013

Principal Investigator(s):

Tim Kruse 1201 S. Ransom Dr. Stillwater, OK 74074	Bernita Krumm 310 Willard Stillwater, OK 74078
---	--

---

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 219 Cordell North (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Shelia Kennison, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Timothy L. Kruse

Candidate for the Degree of Educational Leadership Studies

Doctor of Education

Thesis: CURRENT ZERO-TOLERANCE DISCIPLINE APPROACHES: PERSPECTIVES  
FROM EXEMPLARY ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Major Field: School Administration

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership  
Studies at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Adult Education at University  
of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK in 2007.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Education at Oklahoma  
State University, Stillwater, OK 1997.

Experience:

Stillwater Public Schools Lincoln Academy, Math Teacher, 2006-2012

Stillwater Public Schools Junior High, Math Teacher, 2000-2006

Morrison Public Schools, Math Teacher, 1998-2000

Glencoe Public Schools, Math Teacher, 1997-1998

Professional Memberships:

National Board Certified Teacher, 2004-2014

Oklahoma Education Association, 2000-2012

Stillwater Education Association

Lincoln Academy Teacher of the Year, 2010-2011

Oklahoma Coaches Association, 2000-2006



Name: Timothy L. Kruse

Date of Degree: May, 2012

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: CURRENT ZERO TOLERANCE DISCIPLINE APPROACHES:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM EXEMPLARY ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

Pages in Study: 137

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major Field: School Administration

**Scope and Method of Study:** The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore alternative school administrator, teacher, and student perceptions of the factors that surround zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices, and to identify discipline alternatives that do not remove or exclude students from the school setting. A case study was employed to explain the reasons behind the unexpected consequences of zero tolerance discipline practices. Participants in the study included 6 students and 15 staff members from 3 Midwestern alternative schools. Data was collected through formal and informal interviews and conversations.

**Findings and Conclusions:** Schools must adapt and update their discipline policies to better address the needs of at-risk students. The at-risk students who attend alternative schools are often transient and have challenging home situations, which impacts their attendance and attitude, and creates gaps in their education. Schools should identify these at-risk students, and place them with teachers specially trained to deal with these students unique behaviors and needs. Applying zero tolerance discipline by automatically suspending a student out-of-school is appropriate only if the student poses an imminent threat to the personal safety of themselves or others. Long-term out-of-school suspensions do not consistently impact misbehavior, and in fact may lead students to behave in a worse manner upon return. Out-of-school suspension is an unreliable method of disciplining students, and should be phased out as a punishment. In-school suspension is effective as a discipline method as long as it is short-term, allows the student to continue his education, and permits the student to maintain some connection with the school. At-risk students prefer the small school atmosphere, where they feel less anonymous and are able to develop relationships with adults and with other students. Alternative school staff focuses on listening to the students and dealing with individual needs, in line with Glasser's discipline model, and all participants in this study noted the importance of having a large and available counseling component in the school.

ADVISOR'S APPROVAL: Dr. Bernita Krumm