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**A multi-systemic approach to reducing suspensions and expulsions  
in schools in the United States**

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**There is a large body of research that supports the importance of the family to the child or adolescent's success in school. There is also growing awareness of the importance of providing prevention and intervention strategies for students who are at risk of being suspended, expelled, or of becoming disengaged from the educational process for social or emotional reasons. This article is a summary of one South Carolina (United States of America) school district's efforts to focus on the family in dealing with discipline problems and providing alternatives to suspension and expulsion.**

**Keywords:** family counseling, school-based family counseling, at-risk youth

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**Introduction**

The use of suspensions and exclusions in public schools in the United States (US) to deal with students with school discipline problems has come under scrutiny because of reports of the ineffectiveness of this approach as well as of the possible inequality of this approach as applied to minority and/or culturally different populations. Expanding the options available to a school district to deal with these students to include school-based family counseling services is the focus of this paper. This article will describe the family counseling services that are offered by a public school district in South Carolina as alternatives to suspension and as preventive measures for future suspensions/expulsions.

**Use of suspensions and exclusions in schools**

Even though research has consistently documented the ineffectiveness of punitive responses to discipline problems (Achilles, McLaughlin & Croninger, 2007; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; American Psychological Association, 2008), many schools continue to deal

with violations in a punitive manner, including suspension and expulsion (which means that the student is no longer allowed to attend school at all during that school year, often referred to as exclusion in other settings). Indeed, the incidence of suspensions in public schools in the United States has risen dramatically. Losen and Gillespie (2012) report that, in 1972-1973, 3.1% of students enrolled were suspended for one day or more; in 1988-1989, 5.4%, and in 2006-2007, 7.44%. More dramatic than this figure are the racial disparities evidenced in the data: African American suspensions have gone from 6 to 15% (suspensions as percent of enrollment by race), Hispanic from 3 to 7%, Native American from 3 to 8% and Asian from 1 to 3%. Meanwhile, suspensions of White students have gone from 3 to 5%. One is hard-pressed to conclude that suspensions are effective in curbing school disruptions by students, particularly among minorities. Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May and Tobin (2011) examined disproportionality in school discipline for African Americans and Hispanics. In an analysis of school discipline records from 364 elementary and middle schools across the US, they found that African Americans are 2.19 (at the elementary school level) to 3.78 (at the middle school level) times more likely to be sent to the office for disciplinary reasons than their White peers. Hispanic results showed more variability, with referrals rising in the middle school years. Further, they found that the consequences delivered to students of color were more likely to be more severe than those delivered to White peers for the same infraction. They state that disproportionality has been documented in various reports for over 25 years (Skiba et al., 2002).

Sullivan, Klingbeil and Van Norman (2013) analyzed school year 2009-2010 suspension records in the US along a number of factors and found that gender, race, disability and socioeconomic status correlated with risk of suspension. Multiple suspensions were more common among African American and disabled students. Furthermore, 7.6% of students overall were suspended once, but 20% of African American and disabled were suspended at least once. They did not find that the school variables of demographics, performance or teacher characteristics predicted risk of suspension.

Losen and Gillespie (2012), from their analysis of suspension data published by the Civil Rights Project of the University of California (Los Angeles), report that over 3 million children in the US were suspended for at least one day in 2008-2009. Rausch and Skiba (2004) concluded that 5% of suspensions were for serious or dangerous offenses in the state that they studied, while 95% were for disruptive and “other” offenses. Each day of suspension translates into lost opportunity for that student to engage in learning school subjects and to engage himself/herself in developing relationships and behaviors that will support future school success; however, the student may be learning other lessons. It is no accident that school drop-out and future incarceration are correlated positively with high suspension rates (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). One of the recommendations coming from the Losen and Gillespie report is that schools look at the problem systemically, analyzing all of the factors that are contributing to the discipline problems, including district policies, school administrative policies, school climate, teacher variables and family variables.

The issue of suspension and exclusion from school is not unique to the US school system. Cassidy (2010) in Canada called on schools to develop a culture of care that rejects punitive policies such as exclusion from school. Daniels and Cole (2010) and Pirrie, MacLeod, Cullen

and McCluskey (2011) in England looked at outcomes for students who were excluded and noted the disadvantage students experienced.

### **School Based Family Counseling as an intervention for student discipline problems**

Gerrard (2008) has taken a comprehensive look at the role that school-based family counseling (SBFC) has had in addressing school difficulties. He described SBFC as follows:

SBFC is an approach to helping children succeed at school and overcome personal and interpersonal problems. SBFC integrates school counseling and family counseling models within a broad based systems meta-model that is used to conceptualize the child's problems in the context of all his or her interpersonal networks: family, peer group, classroom, school (teacher, principal, other students), and community. When a child is referred to the SBFC professional, the child's problem may involve one or all of these interpersonal networks. However, irrespective of the level of interpersonal network affected, the SBFC professional will relate positively with the child's family in order to reinforce positive change with the child.

This approach fits well with the Losen and Gillespie (2012) recommendation to view discipline problems systemically. Carlson and Sincavage (1987) noted from a survey of 110 school psychologists that family variables played a significant role in students' problems. Stinchfield (2004) presents a case for offering family therapy services at the school level, stating that the office-based services traditionally offered did not address the needs of at-risk families well. Yet, including family therapy services in the public school system approach has not been widely embraced. Gerrard (2008) noted that the family therapy literature does not often mention this approach and that, while there have been some programs across the years (Boyd-Franklin & Bry, 2000; Winawer & Wetzel, 1999), this does not appear to be an emphasis for family therapists. School systems have often advocated for mental health services, but these are usually seen as separate from the school in the US and are often client rather than family based. Soriano (2004) points out that shifting the focus from helping a family in crisis to promoting school success makes family therapy services more palatable to families; hosting the services in the schools also makes them more accessible to low-income families.

### **Description of Richland School District Two**

This article is a report on the efforts of Richland School District 2 (RSD2) to develop viable alternatives to suspending or expelling students that involve the family. RSD2 is a suburban school district in Columbia, SC, with over 25,000 students. The ethnic distribution of the population is approximately 60% African American, 25% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic and 5% Asian. Approximately 55% of the students are receiving free or reduced lunches, a poverty indicator. The district is known for maintaining a high level of excellence in student achievement.

High levels of suspensions/expulsions have long beleaguered school districts, particularly those in South Carolina. 2009 data from the Office of Civil Rights indicate that South Carolina's suspension rate was 13% (compared to the US average of 7%) and that African-Americans (37% of the total population of students) had a 21% risk of suspension versus an 8% risk for Whites.

RSD2, similar to many public school districts, has struggled through the years with the conundrum: maintaining an orderly and productive school environment so that students can pursue learning at an optimal level versus suspending and expelling students who disrupt this process, and thus removing them from the very resource that they most need to be successful in life. Consistent with national recommendations, the Richland 2 Board of Trustees has developed clear discipline policies that are published on-line and presented to students each year in a printed handbook. Offenses and consequences are organized into different levels according to severity. Middle and high school students are given in-depth presentations on the discipline code during school orientation sessions; elementary school students are integrated into an understanding of school rules early in the school process. Notices are sent home to parents, citing the code, whenever serious discipline infractions incur. Still, knowledge of the code alone has not been sufficient as a prevention tool. Nor have detentions, suspensions and expulsions been sufficient as intervention tools. The Board of Trustees, devoted to reducing drop-out rates as well as suspension/expulsion rates, has funded several alternatives to expulsion, such as alternative schools and community-based drug counseling programs for first offenders.

### **Development of the Family Intervention Services Program (FISP)**

In the school year 2005-2006, the Director of Learning Support Services [coordinator for guidance, social work, drug prevention, community mental health and nursing services, using the model developed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor (2004) through the Center for Mental Health in Schools at the University of California at Los Angeles] was authorized to hire an Intervention Services Coordinator. This directive emerged from a growing concern about the number of suspensions/expulsions in the school district. The RSD2 Board of Directors endorsed the dual concepts of family involvement and family responsibility. Family involvement is often cited in the literature as an indicator of school success (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Family responsibility, on the other hand, is a response that seeks to engage the family of misbehaving students in solving discipline issues. It presents as a cooperative strategy (and is used this way) but is too often used to blame the parents for failing to properly educate/discipline their children. School-based family counseling is a positive response both to family involvement and to family responsibility that unites school, home and community systems; as such, it was embraced by the Board of Directors as well as by district administrators.

The person hired as the Intervention Services Coordinator (ISC) was a mental health clinician with family systems, school counseling and juvenile justice background. She was charged with developing an alternative response that initially would be enacted at the district's 4 high schools, prior to a recommendation of expulsion. Her family systems training allowed her to wed family involvement and family responsibility into a program that responded to both of these needs. Thus, the Family Intervention Services Program (FISP) has had continued Board of Directors and administrative support, allowing the program to expand over these past 8 years into a comprehensive intervention program that has experienced much success and can be presented as a model for mental health involvement in the schools.

### **Description of School-Based Family Counseling interventions provided**

In the first year (2005-2006), students who reached a third suspension were referred for family counseling in lieu of a recommendation of expulsion from school (district policy dictates that a student be recommended for expulsion after 3 suspensions). The families were seen at a district

office site from 1 to 10 sessions; some students were followed individually at their school site, some were seen with the family counselor, teacher, administrator and parent, and some at their home when unable to travel to the district office. With SBFC chosen as the primary intervention strategy, the coordinator, also a licensed marriage and family therapist and professional counselor supervisor, was assisted by graduate interns from area universities and colleges.

With the growing number of families referred for services, the coordinator expanded services in 2006-07 to include a multi-family group program, the Family Solutions Program (FSP), which utilized trained facilitators meeting with 4-10 families at a time. This program is a 10-week psycho-educational program developed by Families 4 Change (<http://families4change.org/>) in Athens, Georgia with a successful track record when used with juvenile offender populations (Quinn & Van Dyke, 2004). In the second year of using the FSP, the school board required that all families of students at the district alternative schools participate in the multi-family group program.

The Family Intervention Services Program has continued to grow and develop over the years. It currently is housed in 3 portable units on a high school campus. Family counseling rooms are equipped with one-way mirrors, telephones, and videotaping equipment so that counselors can be observed, as well as interact by telephone with a supervisor and record sessions electronically. Family counseling services are offered in the evenings, when parents and siblings can attend after work or school, and when students do not have to be removed from valuable class time.

In the school year 2012-2013, the staff of FISP included 5 full-time family counselors, including 1 Latino counselor. It should be noted that the availability of family counseling services in Spanish fills a significant gap in services in the community. Latinos have a very difficult time obtaining mental health services delivered in their native language. The local mental health agency does not have any native Spanish-speaking counselors. There is only one native Spanish-speaking guidance counselor in the school district and no school psychologists. Continued collaboration with area counselor training programs provides approximately 10 interns a year and 6 practicum students, for an estimated 6,900 hours of intervention services to students and families. Graduates of these programs continue to request placement in our district as externs (volunteers) in exchange for family counseling supervision required for licensure, and in total provide a minimum of an additional 900 hours of direct counseling services each year. The graduate students are provided with both individual and group supervision for their counseling with students and families. Some also co-facilitate one or more of the family groups, adding to the overall development of their competencies in dealing with families of at risk students. This “quid pro quo” arrangement in which colleges and universities receive quality placement opportunities for their students allows RSD2 to increase significantly the amount of service to its students and families. In addition, FISP has trained many district counselors and some community members in the Building Bridges to Success (BBTS) program; these persons serve as co-facilitators for these programs held in the evenings.

The population of students and their families who are provided with SBFC services fall into 4 main categories: (A) students who have received a third suspension from a district high school and are referred for family intervention in lieu of a recommendation for expulsion; (B)

students in grade k-12 who have been recommended for expulsion and are placed back in their home school on probation; (C) students who are sent to district alternative schools for a period of a minimum of 45 days prior to returning to their home school; and (D) students who are experiencing school, family, or social/emotional problems and are referred by a district social worker, administrator, psychologist or guidance counselor. The counseling is mandatory only in category 3, where students/families participate in the multi-family Building Bridges to Success program (in use since 2010, a 6 session plus one community service session program developed by the FISP staff to replace the 10 session FSP program). In addition, counseling and consultation services are offered at the school site to BBTS students who are making the transition from the alternative school to the home school and to students who are participating in family counseling services. Counselors communicate through email and visits to administrators, guidance staff, teachers and other referring parties. Thus, the tie to the school is maintained while engaging the family in the hard work of examining its own family systems.

The “Service Leaders” program, instituted by FISP staff members as an additional preventive measure, moves from providing a service *to* students to *students providing a service for others*. Students who participate in intervention services during the year who make good progress are invited to apply to become a Service Leader. The Service Leaders selected then receive training in leadership skills and are expected to serve as positive role models in the community service and other projects. They commit to volunteer in at least one Saturday service project a month designed for students who are mandated to participate as part of BBTS. Anecdotally, the FISP staff has been amazed at how proud students are to be selected and to have the opportunity to serve as leaders, as well as how proud their parents are to see their students engaged in a positive school-based activity. These students have also been engaged as counselors in a summer camp experience offered to young children of families receiving counseling as well as needy community members, another partnership developed by the FISP.

One additional program was developed recently: FISP staff noted that parents and students often had low expectations regarding higher education and career opportunities. Lack of positive engagement with the school meant that they often did not attend mainstream presentations offered by the middle and high schools on this topic. Therefore, in 2011, the FISP staff developed “Future Visions,” a program that addresses educational/career planning and options after graduation for those students in grades 6-12 who had been referred through the disciplinary process. The program has been developed into a daylong conference led by educational/career specialists who provide the students/families information aimed at helping them to focus on what is needed to be successful both in school and in the future. Topics covered in the seminars are college and career options (including non-traditional careers), financial aid information, the application process, and testimony from at risk students who have graduated and are successfully working or in college. A special Future Visions for Latino students and their families was offered in the fall of 2012 that addressed the above topics as well as current immigration issues and access to education and careers for undocumented immigrants.

As is illustrated by the above discussion, the FISP staff constantly engages in creative thinking about the barriers to learning and success that the students they serve might encounter, and how these barriers might be overcome. New initiatives are constantly being discussed, researched and implemented when possible.

## Methodology

Reference resources were sought from peer-reviewed publications and US databases. The entry point for all services reported here was through school-based family counseling services. All students referred are listed in a database, which includes demographic data. Services are differentiated into four categories, as described above. Each service provided to the student is coded on a weekly basis in the database, as well as which family members attended sessions. Each parent/family member who attends is counted separately. Outcome data are gathered through official RSD2 discipline records. In the only service that is mandatory (service C), parents and students complete pre- and post-surveys measuring attitudes.

## A Report of Recent Data Collected

This paper will report on data collected from the school year 2006-2007 to 2011-2012, the past 6 years.

*Students who have received a 3<sup>rd</sup> suspension from a district high school and are referred for family intervention in lieu of a recommendation for expulsion.*

Figure 1

School Year	Referrals	Seen for intake interview	Received follow up family services	Parents who participated	Other family members who participated
2006-2007	503	221 (44%)	139 (28%)	306	Not available (NA)
2007-2008	347	152 (44%)	126 (36%)	160	NA
2008-2009	520	199 (38%)	144 (28%)	NA	NA
2009-2010	460	148 (32%)	106 (23%)	173	52
2010-2011	274	122 (45%)	83 (30%)	145	65
2011-2012	299	97 (32%)	70 (23%)	111	52

These services are not mandatory. They are offered as a service by the school district. If a family comes in for services, the school administrator is notified and the student receives a “token” to give to his/her administrator. The median percent of referred families who came in for the intake interview is 41% and the mean is 39%; the median percent who continued past the intake is 29% and the mean is 28%.

The FISP staff believes that this rate of participation is high; however, this type of program, to our knowledge, is not being implemented in other school districts, so it is difficult to come up with comparison numbers. It is clear, however, that the dual goals of family involvement and family responsibility are being served. Reaching out to the families of students who are in trouble at school in a positive way is not often achieved through the regular discipline process. An interesting point of data is the number of other children in the family who attend. Family therapy theory would support the contention that participating in the therapy could be a “protective” factor for those children. Indeed, if the family becomes “healthier,” one would expect the siblings of the referred student at least to better understand the family conflict that repeated school rule-breaking stimulates.

*Students in grade 1-12 who have been recommended for expulsion and attended an expulsion hearing and are placed back in their home school on strict probation (this service began in 2007-2008).*

Figure 2

School Year	Referrals	Seen for intake interview	Received follow-up family services	Parents who participated	Other family members who participated
2006-2007	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
2007-2008	NA	60	26	NA	NA
2008-2009	265	135 (51%)	90 (34%)	NA	NA
2009-2010	179	125 (70%)	109 (60%)	169	53
2010-2011	145	109 (75%)	93 (64%)	139	74
2011-2012	176	103 (59%)	78 (44%)	112	55

This service also is not mandatory. The percentages of families who came in for the intake interview (mean of 64%) and those who participated in counseling services (mean of 51%) were significantly higher than those who participated in the previous service category (A). Perhaps the “wake-up” call that resulted from having to attend an expulsion hearing could be cited as the reason for this uptick in families following through with services. Again, family involvement and family responsibility are supported. The number of persons (student plus parents/guardians plus siblings and other family members) impacted by services A and B is large.

*Students who are sent to district alternative schools for a period of a minimum of 45 days prior to returning to their home school.*

Figure 3

School Year	Completed Building Bridges multi-family group	Parents who participated
*2009-2010	43 (207) =250	53 (232) = 285
2010-2011	185	277
2011-2012	193	290

A. \*In 2009-2010, FISP transitioned from offering the Family Solutions Program to utilizing its own multi-family group curriculum. Therefore, the numbers completing the FSP were added to those completing the BBTS program.

Participating in Family Intervention Services is a requirement for being able to exit the alternative school. Most students complete the Building Bridges to Success program (6 multi-family group sessions plus one community service activity). However, some families have problems judged too severe for a multi-group setting and some families cannot arrange their schedules to be able to attend the sessions offered; these families are served in single-family sessions.

Students and parents in 2010-2012 were required to complete pre- and post-rating scales. In general, across both years, students have shown positive growth in their attitudes toward school and in their ability to succeed in school. Parents report that they have more confidence in their student being able to succeed in school and also report greater harmony at home. (The student questionnaire does not include questions about family harmony.)

*Students who are experiencing school/family/social/emotional problems and are referred by a district social worker, administrator, psychologist or guidance counselor.*

Figure 4

<b>School Year</b>	<b>Students who participated</b>	<b>Parents who participated</b>	<b>Other family members who participated</b>
2006-2007	NA	NA	NA
2007-2008	5	7	NA
2008-2009	121	134	NA
2009-2010	213	NA	48
2010-2011	138	127	80
2011-2012	240	128	87

As the FISP staff available increased, they were able to provide services to more students who were not having severe discipline problems but who were having behavioral or socio-emotional problems. School-level personnel began seeing SBFC as a resource to be tapped as a treatment as well as a preventive measure.

### **Summary Data**

The FISP program has kept a running count of the total number of students in all categories that have received services each year. Totals for parents and other family members who participated have been recorded since 2009-2010.

Figure 5

<b>School Year</b>	<b>Total # of students</b>	<b>Total # of parents</b>	<b>Total # of other family members</b>	<b>Total</b>
2006-2007	309	406	NA	
2007-2008	510	579	NA	
2008-2009	759	1001	NA	
2009-2010	855	723	181	1759
2010-2011	714	766	262	1742
2011-2012	889	792	257	1938

Thus, the number of students, parents and other family members impacted by the FISP is large. Proposing that the services have had an overall positive effect, one might predict that the overall expulsion rate for the district would decrease. The following chart shows just that.

In the years since the FISP program began in 2005, the following statistics were noted:

Figure 6

<b>School Year</b>	<b>Total population of district</b>	<b>Number of students expelled</b>	<b>Per pupil rate</b>
2006-2007	21,375	213	.009965

2007-2008	22,540	180	.007986
2008-2009	23,636	217	.009181
2009-2010	24,178	164	.006783
2010-2011	24,758	141	.005695
2011-2012	25,398	129	.005079

Of course there are a myriad of factors that affect expulsion rates. The data is not available that could corroborate the exact effect of the FISP. Indeed, the true effect of the FISP may not lie in expulsion data but in the reduction in school dropouts and in more subtle measures, such as family harmony, family problem-solving skills, family and student hope for successful future outcomes, and student confidence. However, the data collected do indicate a trend toward positive outcomes. At the least, the program demonstrates that the school district administrators and Board of Trustees are interested in finding ways to strengthen families, to involve them, and to assist them with proactively dealing with the discipline problems of their children. This approach offers a viable alternative to suspension and expulsion.

Ethnicity data was also collected on all students. In the school year 2008-2009, 81% of those referred were African-American, 13% were White, 4% were Hispanic and 2% were "Other." In the school year 2011-2012, 74% of those referred were African-American, 14% were White, 9% were Hispanic and 3% were "Other." Thus, African-Americans continue to be over-represented among those referred for behavioral problems; however, the trend does appear at this juncture to be a downward one.

### **Discussion**

The data collected are clearly only descriptive of the amount of services delivered. However, the types of services delivered vary according to the needs of the student and family. This type of approach demonstrates how a SBFC program can integrate itself into the needs of the school system while providing opportunities for family systems to access services. The sheer numbers of students, parents, and siblings included in the process are a testament to the flexibility of the approach as well as to the willingness of the SBFC staff to provide services at a time when parents and students are available, rather than at a time that conforms to school district hours. The reasons why participation rates in services A and B were not higher are not known; however, one might suppose that the family is either blaming the student or blaming the school for the suspension/ expulsion and is not in a position to believe that family counseling would be worthwhile. Also, family counseling is not a well-known service in the community, since most counseling is client-focused. A letter stating that the service is available is clearly not the most effective way to encourage participation.

### **Conclusion**

Working within the confines of a school system to develop a program that provides family intervention services is challenging at best. School budgets at this point in time are very limited by a number of economic factors. However, school district Boards of Trustees and superintendents are compelled by federal and by some state law to examine practices that might be considered discriminatory and to seek best practice solutions. At the same time, educators are

engaged in the process of making school a successful place for all of their students. Excluding students from school does not fit in with their goals as educators, but maintaining a disciplined atmosphere where learning can take place does. Enlisting the support of parents in this process has traditionally meant inviting parents to share in the responsibility for providing conditions for learning at home and to support the school in its efforts to provide a safe learning environment for students. Offering family counseling services to the students most at risk of school drop-out is a logical extension of support services. In a district where 55% of the students receive free or reduced lunch, offering these services through the school system is an added benefit for families who cannot otherwise afford these services. Furthermore, working with the family as a whole can also have positive repercussions for other siblings in the family. Family therapists must align their goals with the goals of educators to be taken seriously and seen as a resource; becoming a part of the system of the school can enhance the scope of family therapy and ground it in the practical day-to-day life of the students.

The program described above had its origins in the minds of school district officials who were actively seeking alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. It began to take root as an extension of programs for at-risk students and fits in with state grants designed to address the needs of these students (where it currently receives funding for many of its programs). It was further nourished by hiring someone who was thoroughly familiar with the school system (a school guidance counselor) who was also an experienced family therapist and licensed family therapist supervisor. This person had ties to university programs in the area that were in the process of training family therapists and school counselors, and was able to form partnerships with these educational institutions. These partnerships extended the reach and breadth of the program by offering internship experiences as well as supervision on site. The willingness of the school district to fund additional positions is reflective of the superintendent's and Board of Trustees' satisfaction with the success of the program. Perhaps the next appropriate position to be funded would be that of a research assistant who could suggest better ways of measuring success and who could manage the large amount of data being collected.

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