

**Needed: Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspension
A Stakeholder Forum**

**Hosted by
Attorney General Roy Cooper**

**Sponsored by
Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation**

**Report Prepared by
The Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention**

January 2003

Executive Summary

North Carolina Governor Mike Easley signed Senate Bill 71 (SB71) into law on June 11, 2001. SB71 represents an effort to identify successful programs addressing short-term suspension in North Carolina public schools. As part of SB71, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (DJJDP) are mandated to collaborate to identify school systems which have short-term suspension programs.

The collaboration of the two departments has evolved through three phases. During phase one, programs were jointly recruited by the departments through a call for proposals. Phase two of SB71 involved a second call for proposals. Coterminous with the second call for proposals was a phone survey of the 117 local education agencies (LEAs) in North Carolina. DJJDP – Center for the Prevention of School Violence carried out this survey in order to identify existing short-term suspension programs. Phase three of the collaborative effort between DPI and DJJDP involved a request made to the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation via the Attorney General’s Office for sponsorship of a forum aimed at collecting input from school representatives, juvenile justice professionals, and policy makers. Forum findings will be combined with program information that has been gathered through the course of the SB71 project to create the report which will go to the State Board of Education and then to the Education Oversight Committee of the General Assembly in Spring, 2003.

The forum was structured to provide information as well as solicit input. Forum attendees heard speeches and presentations from Governor Mike Easley, Attorney General Roy Cooper, Senator Charles Carter, Secretary George Sweat of DJJDP, Deputy Superintendent Brad Sneed of DPI, DJJDP and DPI staff, and community representatives. Specific presentations addressed the history of SB71, the efforts put forth to carry out SB71, research concerning current initiatives regarding alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspensions, and local programming efforts concerning alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension. The morning session concluded with a brief question and answer session with the morning presenters from the local programs along with DJJDP and DPI staff serving as a panel. In the afternoon, attendees broke into small working groups to discuss challenges, realistic alternative programming, and next steps. The large group reconvened at day’s end to hear reports from each of the groups.

Based on the work of the groups, several conclusions regarding alternatives to short-term out-of school suspension programs can be identified as “forum findings” and provide input for future decisions about such programming. Group participants agreed that challenges in the form of funding, communication, transportation, and shared resources / collaboration exist in programming efforts at the local level. While describing challenges faced by both juvenile justice and education, the groups also presented various ideas for realistic programming. These ideas included additional staff developments to enhance qualifications of school personnel, programming which includes student follow-up and parental involvement components, and involvement of the community, including the faith-based community, to ensure the participation of all voices. Next steps identified by the working groups included actions for both local and state personnel. Four next steps were echoed in almost every group: enhancement of communication and collaboration between school and juvenile justice personnel at state and local levels; involvement of other stakeholders, specifically the faith-based community; allowance for flexibility for students and schools in unfunded mandates; and establishment of uniform discipline guidelines for suspending students.

Introduction

Every day in North Carolina students are suspended out of their schools. In 2000-2001 alone, 217,758 short-term suspensions involving 114,621 students took place with a resulting 650,000 lost instructional days. While responding to inappropriate behavior with such suspensions is not a new education practice, concern about the number of students being suspended, the consequences of the suspensions, and their effectiveness is growing. This concern prompted North Carolina's General Assembly in 2001 to pass legislation designed to explore alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension in the hopes of creating pilot programs for all school systems to consider.

Considerable effort was put forth by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (DJJDP) in 2001 and early 2002 to fulfill the requirements of the legislation. After much effort, the obvious lack of alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspensions was noted by the involved departments as well as by the North Carolina Attorney General's Office. As a result of the understanding that such alternatives are needed, Attorney General Roy Cooper's Office sought funding to generate dialogue regarding the issue. The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation welcomed the opportunity to support a forum designed to obtain input from juvenile justice professionals, educators, and policy makers. The intent of the forum was to examine the current state of alternatives-to-suspension programming and to reexamine the legislation so that additional steps can be taken to fill the void in programming that exists.

The forum on alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension was held on October 22, 2002, at the McKimmon Center located at North Carolina State University. Approximately 100 juvenile justice professionals, local education agency (LEA) representatives, and policy makers attended the forum sponsored by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. The Attorney General's Office, DPI, and DJJDP facilitated the forum which was specifically designed to obtain input from attendees with regard to the type of programming that is needed and feasible given existing mandates and constraints dealing with short-term out-of-school suspensions. The following report provides background information regarding actions leading up to the forum as well as a description of the forum itself. Included in the latter is information about the forum's structure, content, and findings.

Background

North Carolina Governor Mike Easley signed Senate Bill 71 (SB71) into law on June 11, 2001. SB71 calls for the creation of a pilot in five school systems with programs for students who receive short-term out-of-school suspensions. Under state law, short-term out-of-school suspension is defined as suspension for ten days or less. SB71 represents an effort to identify successful programs addressing short-term suspension in North Carolina public schools. It also emphasizes the need for community involvement in such programming. "Efforts behind Senate Bill 71 display the importance of children and education while also challenging everyone working with children," said Senator Charles Carter, prime sponsor of SB71.

As part of SB71, DPI and DJJDP are mandated to collaborate to identify school systems which have short-term suspension programs. The collaboration of the two departments has evolved through three phases. During phase one, programs were jointly recruited by the departments through a call for proposals. This call resulted in the identification of two sites, located in Burke and Gaston counties, which meet almost all of the requirements of SB71. Teams from DPI and DJJDP visited these sites to

carry out a program mapping process designed to identify gaps between the programs and SB71 requirements.

Phase two of SB71 involved a second call for proposals. No additional sites were generated from this call, however. The rigorous requirements of the legislation as well as the lack of funding associated with it were determined to be explanations for this lack of response. Coterminous with the second call for proposals was a phone survey of the 117 school systems in North Carolina. DJJDP – Center for the Prevention of School Violence carried out this survey in order to identify existing short-term suspension programs. A number of programs were identified, and several showed interest in further involvement with the SB71 effort in the State. Site visits were conducted to develop more in-depth understanding of the programs.

Because of a desire for additional input for the SB71 report, which will be submitted to the State Board of Education and General Assembly in 2003, phase three of the collaborative effort between DPI and DJJDP involved a request made to the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation via the Attorney General's Office for sponsorship of the forum. The input collected via the forum is described in this document and will be combined with program information which has been gathered through the course of the SB71 project to create the report which will go to the State Board of Education and then to the Education Oversight Committee of the General Assembly.

The Forum

Forum Structure

The day-long forum held at McKimmon Center was structured to provide information as well as solicit input. Forum attendees heard speeches and presentations from the Governor, Attorney General, Senator Carter, Secretary George Sweat of DJJDP, Deputy Superintendent Brad Sneed of DPI, DJJDP and DPI staff, and community representatives. Specific presentations addressed the history of SB71, the efforts put forth to carry out SB71, research regarding current initiatives regarding alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspensions, and local programming efforts concerning alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension. The morning session concluded with a brief question and answer session with the morning presenters from the local programs along with DJJDP and DPI staff serving as a panel. In the afternoon, attendees broke into small working groups to discuss challenges, realistic alternative programming, and next steps. These discussions were undertaken with the requirements of SB71 in mind. Each of the three groups, which were divided based on school system size, contained representatives from the juvenile justice and school communities. The large group reconvened at day's end to hear reports from each of the groups.

***“We need a ‘can do’
attitude.”***

***- DJJDP Secretary
George Sweat***

Forum Content: Speeches

Speeches provided by key policy makers allowed for global treatment of the issue and created a sense of urgency that additional steps beyond SB71 need to be taken. Deputy Superintendent Sneed opened the forum by stressing the importance of student attendance and community collaboration in preventing students from falling behind in the classroom and in testing. “Data shows that when students are in school, they are learning,” said Sneed. “Data also shows that when students are not in school, they fall behind and do not test well.” Mr. Sneed also suggested a no-nonsense approach for schools: “We need to learn to solve problems and not to put band-aids over them,” said Sneed. As a precursor to Secretary Sweat’s remarks, Deputy Superintendent Sneed also encouraged a community approach considering what is best for each community.

“We need to learn to solve problems and not put band-aids over them.”

***- Deputy Superintendent
Brad Sneed***

Secretary Sweat began his remarks by encouraging the group to focus on building a system of education that gives every child an opportunity for an education and a chance for success. In doing this, Secretary Sweat suggested the cause of inappropriate behaviors must first be identified. He emphasized the importance of early prevention and intervention efforts in preventing inappropriate behaviors later while also addressing potential community safety issues. Secretary Sweat also encouraged collaboration among all stakeholders. In a time when society is expecting more than merely academic success from schools, “we must all do more to make a difference in the lives of young people,” said Sweat.

Attorney General Roy Cooper provided the keynote luncheon address. “Students need to be given every opportunity to achieve classroom success,” said Cooper. “Providing alternatives to short-term suspensions enables such success to be accomplished.” Cooper, one of the main sponsors of SB71 when it was passed by the General Assembly, urged school system and community juvenile justice representatives to prioritize the creation and support of alternatives to suspension.

Governor Mike Easley opened the final session of the day with a speech that emphasized the importance of early prevention efforts while also thanking all forum attendees for their efforts involving North Carolina’s youth. According to the Governor, early prevention efforts must begin with efforts in early education and early childhood development and continue through dropout prevention. The Governor said, “North Carolina cannot afford to leave one child behind.” Governor Easley told participants that the State was looking to them for guidance in these areas. “If our students are not achieving, then North Carolina is not achieving,” said the Governor.

Senator Carter offered closing remarks, thanking those involved with SB71. Personnel from the education and juvenile justice communities were exhorted to continue the efforts in establishing alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension in an attempt to reduce the number and effects of students being placed out of school. Carter urged forum participants to “take what you have been doing today and be the leader in your LEA or community.”

Forum Content: Presentations

In addition to the speeches, the forum offered presentations regarding the history of SB71, the efforts put forth to carry out SB71, research concerning existing alternatives to short-term suspension programming, and local programming efforts. The presentation of the history of SB71 included legislation leading to the passage of SB71. In General Statute 115C-12(27), the N.C. Legislature called for the State Board of Education to report annually to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee and the Commission on Improving the Academic Achievement of Minority and At-Risk Students on the number of students who have dropped out of school, been suspended, been expelled, or been placed in an alternative program. This charge, along with suspension data from the 2000-2001 school year, was said to have encouraged the State to enact SB71.

The presentation of efforts put forth to carry out SB71 involved descriptions of its requirements, the establishment of the DPI-DJJDP collaborative effort, timelines for SB71’s implementation, site selections, and site visits. This presentation outlined components of SB71. Key components specifically discussed included the requirement of collaboration with stakeholders, inclusion of all students, transportation, and DPI – DJJDP technical assistance.

The collaboration of DPI and DJJDP required by SB71 began with personnel from each department meeting to form a committee responsible for overseeing the process of SB71 implementation. Once established, this committee met regularly in order to establish a timeline and determine the process by which technical assistance would be offered to participating LEAs.

Table One: SB71 Timeline

Committee Action	Date
Distribution of “Request for Proposal” to Superintendent	September, 2001
Deadline for SB71 Proposals	October, 2001
Review Process for SB71 Proposals	November, 2001
Identification of Burke and Gaston Counties as SB71 Sit	December, 2001
Began Technical Assistance to Burke and Gaston Programs	January, 2002
Second Distribution of “Request for Proposal” to Superintendents	March, 2002
SB71 Report to State Board of Education	March, 2003
SB71 Report to Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee	April, 2003

The timeline for SB71 began with the distribution of “Requests for Proposals” notices in September, 2001. These notices, outlining the parameters of SB71, were sent to all 117 superintendents and acted as invitations to participate with DPI and DJJDP. The next step taken included receiving and reviewing proposals submitted by interested LEAs in October and November, 2001. The review process allowed two LEAs,

Burke and Gaston counties, to be identified for participation in SB71 in December, 2001. Although no additional sites were identified, the selection process was re-opened in March, 2002. Technical assistance offered by DPI and DJJDP to the Burke and Gaston programs began in January, 2002, and will continue through the duration of SB71. The timeline ends with a report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee in April, 2003.

Site selections, also discussed in the forum presentation, included the identification of programs in Burke and Gaston counties as examples of alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension programs.

Both LEAs were chosen based on proposals submitted via DPI to the SB71 committee. In the proposals, both programs provided detailed information on their program operation, funding, and participating agencies. Based on their selection and decision to participate with DJJDP and DPI in SB71, each program will submit a report to be included with the final SB71 report to the State Board of Education and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee.

Visits with the Burke and Gaston county programs allowed teams from DPI – DJJDP to complete a program mapping process designed to identify gaps between the programs and SB71 requirements. The “mapping guide” employs four categories to identify the needs of the program and gaps between the programs and SB71 requirements. The categories are: inputs / resources; activities / goals; outputs / immediate response; and outcomes / measurement evaluation. The inputs / resources category specifically lists what is needed (e.g., facilities, staff, materials, funding, insurance coverage) to begin certain types of alternative-to-suspension programs. Specific processes such as the supervision of students, active parental involvement, collaboration with multiple agencies, the continuum of services, and in-take and exit procedures are described in the activities / goals section. The outputs / immediate response category seeks to describe the short-term measures used in determining program effectiveness. The long-term measures used in determining program effectiveness are cited in outcomes / measurement evaluation.

In addition to information provided about SB71, forum attendees were provided the results of research conducted in Spring, 2002, by DJJDP which was designed to identify additional alternatives to short-term suspension programs in North Carolina. Because there was a sense that more programs existed than those surfaced by the call for proposals generated by SB71, DJJDP conducted a survey of North Carolina’s one hundred and seventeen LEAs to determine the existence of alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension. A telephone survey was conducted by DJJDP staff using various contacts in each LEA’s central office. Follow-up site visits, conducted by DJJDP staff, were also performed at several of the identified programs in order to identify strategies and practices employed in the different programs.

Findings from the phone survey, along with several program descriptions developed from site visits, were presented at the forum to provide understanding of the status quo of alternatives to short-term suspension programming. DJJDP’s phone survey revealed four areas regarding existing programs: LEAs with no identified alternative to short-term suspension programming; LEAs with in-school suspension or alternative schools with alternatives to short-term suspension component; LEAs with targeted alternatives to short-term suspension programming; or LEAs with alternatives to short-term suspension of some type. Additional research conducted through the follow-up telephone interviews and program site visits revealed the focus area and collaboration of existing programming identified by LEAs as alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension.

The information from DJJDP’s research provided a springboard for SB71’s “example” programs to be presented to the forum. The Alternative to Out-of-school Suspension Program at the Warlick Alternative School in Gaston County was summarized based on its traditional academic model. This program offers a school-based, in-school suspension model funded solely by Gaston County Schools. While the program operates a self-contained classroom, it is housed in the Warlick Alternative School, the school system’s alternative learning program. The program has two school system staff members, one full-time teacher and one full-time teacher assistant, responsible for monitoring student academic progress while participating in the program. Students in grades six through twelve are awarded academic credit for

attendance and completion of assignments if they choose to participate in the program as opposed to being out-of-school suspended.

The superintendent from Burke County along with the B.A.T.S. (Burke Alternatives To Suspension) coordinator summarized their community service approach to offering alternatives to out-of-school suspension. B.A.T.S. is a school - community approach focused on combining community service with successful completion of assigned schoolwork during short-term suspension (three to ten days) periods. Students in grades sixth through twelve "serve" their suspension time while providing community service at various county non-profit agencies. While time is set aside each day so that schoolwork can be completed, the focus of the program is on behavior modification through community service. Credit is awarded for attendance as well as completed homework. B.A.T.S. has three staff members responsible for assigning and monitoring student involvement with community organizations.

Forum Content: Group Work

After the speeches and presentations were concluded, forum attendees were divided into three working groups according to the size of their local school systems. The small size school system working group included representatives from school systems with 1 – 5,000 students while the medium size school system working group involved systems with 5,001 – 15,000 students and the large size school system working group contained representatives from systems with more than 15,001 students. Policy makers were invited to observe any of the three groups. Each group had a facilitator from either DPI or DJJDP and a host school system superintendent.

In the working groups, juvenile justice and school system representatives shared their thoughts about SB71 and the other information they had heard at the forum. They also discussed the challenges associated with alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension programming, ideas for realistic programs, and next steps that might be taken to further address the need for such programming. Generally speaking, the groups saw the need for what SB71 attempts to do and were impressed by the research they heard regarding programs that exist as well as being particularly impressed by the “example” SB71 programs from Gaston and Burke counties.

Specifically, the small size school system working group contained representatives from the following school systems: Anson County; Asheboro City; Asheville City; Clinton City; Currituck County; Hertford County; Jones County; Montgomery County; Northampton County; Pitt County; Shelby City; Warren County; Washington County; and Wilkes County. DJJDP central office personnel also participated in this group. Overarching themes from this group included collaboration between schools and juvenile justice, flexibility for schools and their handling of students, and the involvement of other stakeholders.

“We are seeking a local solution to a statewide problem.”

- Juvenile Justice Professional

This group saw funding, transportation, communication, staff training, and utilization of current resources as challenges faced by local programming efforts. Participants suggested that any programs should include student follow-up and parental involvement pieces, community involvement, and

collaboration of counselors in the juvenile justice system and the local school system. “In order for programs to be effective, they must have strong follow-up and parental involvement components,” said a juvenile justice representative.

Next steps presented by the small size school system working group encouraged the enhancement of collaboration between schools and juvenile justice. Local level policy makers were asked to ensure that messages traveled to the local level. Participants also provided suggestions for next steps at the state level. They included the establishment of uniform discipline guidelines as well as the creation of flexibility for schools. And, finally, everyone was encouraged to involve other stakeholders, including the faith-based communities.

The medium size school system working group contained representatives from the following school systems: Alamance County; Beaufort County; Burke County; Franklin County; Harnett County; Pender County; Sampson County; Scotland County; and Wilson County. DJJDP central office personnel also participated in this group. Funding, trust, and communication were overarching themes in this group.

Accountability and communication were major barriers mentioned along with transportation and physical and emotional safety by the medium size school system working group. “Our greatest barrier is our own mindset – about the kids, about collaboration,” said an LEA representative. Counseling, mentoring, and staff development were offered as ways of enhancing the physical and emotional safety of programs. It was suggested that programs that provided positive group settings, allow for safer communities, and enhance student self-worth were realistic programming ideas.

Next steps suggested by the medium size school system working group included the establishment of accountability standards, enhanced communications between schools and juvenile justice, and building trust by full disclosure of information on both perspectives. One juvenile justice leader said, “Until we recognize the community nature of the problem, we will continue to move further away from a solution. It is not a juvenile justice or school issue alone. It is a community issue. We need to infuse everything with community involvement.”

The large size school system working group contained representatives from the following school systems: Buncombe County; Cabarrus County; Charlotte / Mecklenburg County; Durham County; Forsyth County; Gaston County; Guilford County; Nash County; Pitt County; and Wake County. Overarching themes from this group included funding, communication, and facilities.

Beyond continuing concerns regarding funding, challenges presented by this group were three-fold: training, facilities, and communication. Training for in-service teachers and others serving youth was suggested so that problems can be resolved by measures other than suspension. One participant concluded “there is a lack of good training for staff who work with kids.” The lack of usable facilities to house alternatives to short-term suspension programs was also mentioned as a barrier. Communication barriers came in the form of a lack of awareness. A representative from the juvenile justice community said that it is essential to “make parents aware of programs and services available for suspended students.”

Streamlining resources, facilitating communication among stakeholders, involving the faith community, and partnering with teachers were next steps for local programming efforts suggested by the large size school system working group. “Programs highlighted in the morning session had creative leaders who

put a spark in the community. The result was a community willing to get involved. This is what we all need,” said an LEA representative. Additionally, communities were challenged to strengthen and better utilize the Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils (JCPCs) in order to hear voices on all sides of this issue. Additionally, the creation of an awareness campaign to inform the community regarding the issue of suspension was suggested as a next step. This campaign would be coupled with a list of research-based programs that have been proven effective. Finally, allowance of additional flexibility was suggested.

Table Two offers a summary of the input generated from group discussions. The next section will further describe these findings.

Table Two: Group Discussion Topics

Group	Challenges	Realistic Programming Ideas	Next Steps
Small	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding • Communication • Transportation • Utilization of current resources • Staff training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff development allowing court counselors and school counselors to develop working relationships • Strong student follow-up component • Parental involvement piece • Community involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance communication and collaboration between schools and juvenile justice • Involve other stakeholders, specifically the faith-based community • Allow flexibility for students and schools in unfunded mandates • Establish uniform discipline guidelines
Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding • Transportation • Physical safety • Emotional safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff development as a resource • Strong student follow-up that includes counseling and mentoring • Community involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance communication and collaboration between schools and juvenile justice • Involve other stakeholders, specifically the faith-based community • Establish uniform discipline guidelines
Large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding • Communication • Utilization of current resources • Training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff development that will allow for program objectives to be clearly communicated • Strong parental involvement • Community involvement in order to utilize resources from all venues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance communication and collaboration between schools and juvenile justice • Involve other stakeholders, specifically the faith-based community • Allow flexibility for students and schools in unfunded mandates

Forum Findings

Based on the work of the groups, several conclusions regarding alternatives to short-term out-of school suspension programs can be identified as “forum findings” and provide input for future decisions about such programming. Challenges, ideas regarding realistic programming, and next steps provide a structure for these findings. Group participants agreed that challenges in the form of funding, communication, transportation, and shared resources / collaboration exist in programming efforts at the local level. While describing challenges faced by both juvenile justice and education, the groups also presented various ideas for realistic programming. These ideas were additional staff developments to

enhance qualifications of school personnel, programming which includes student follow-up and parental involvement components, and involvement of the community, including the faith-based community, to ensure the participation of all voices. Next steps identified by the working groups included actions for both local and state personnel. Four next steps were echoed in almost every group: enhancement of communication and collaboration between school and juvenile justice personnel at state and local levels; involvement of other stakeholders, specifically the faith-based community; allowance for flexibility for students and schools in unfunded mandates; and establishment of uniform discipline guidelines for suspending students.

Challenges: Funding

Funding was discussed in every group by both juvenile justice and school system representatives. Local personnel from both perspectives were concerned about mandates requiring local agencies to provide alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension without the inclusion of additional resources. The groups echoed each other in the sentiment that no unfunded mandates were needed. “We are told to serve the population, but we cannot do it without resources,” said one group participant.

The groups, instead, suggested flexibility as a way of addressing funding issues. Because of the lack of resources and insufficient funds, many school systems and local programs expressed concern that they are unable to meet all of the expected standards enacted by legislation. Allowing flexibility for students and schools increases the ability of local efforts to adapt programming to meet their specific needs.

Challenges: Communication

In order for a program addressing short-term out-of-school suspensions to operate successfully, participants suggested that effective communication must exist at all levels and between all involved agencies. Communication barriers were said to currently exist in all areas and levels: state; community; school; and family. At the state level, some juvenile justice and school representatives feared that “messages are not going all the way down to the local level.” Along with the need to effectively communicate the need for alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension programs, communication at the community level was suggested to foster the idea that “we all need to take ownership and display leadership” in addressing the issue of short-term out-of-school suspensions. “They are our children no matter where they reside,” said one group participant.

Communication barriers at the school level appeared to involve two key issues: student referral and student homework. Forum participants voiced frustration at a lack of uniformity in student actions eliciting short-term out-of-school suspensions. Communication was offered as a means for all schools in a school system to create baseline behaviors. The second communication barrier voiced by the various groups participating in the forum dealt with student homework while participating in the alternative to short-term suspension program. Since the possibility of receiving credit for homework and attendance is a motivation factor for these programs, it is imperative that effective communication be established so that teachers, school administrators, and program personnel can assist in these areas. The final barrier involved family communication. One forum speaker suggested, “Schools have become the ‘do all’ for students.” While participants were willing to accept community responsibility for this issue, they were not willing to “let parents off the hook.” In order to serve the children, “we must all do more,” challenged one juvenile justice representative.

Challenges: Transportation

Almost every working group in the afternoon session cited transportation as a major barrier facing local programs. While the groups did not reach a consensus of whether programs should offer transportation to participants, they did agree that no child should be left out because of transportation issues. It was suggested that programs develop, based on their individual needs, a plan for the transportation of students while keeping in mind that transportation issues should not prevent a student from participating in the alternative to short-term out-of-school suspension program.

Also involved in the concerns of offering transportation to students involved in alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension programs were local policy and liability issues. As is often the case in North Carolina school systems, once students are out-of-school suspended, they are no longer allowed contact with the school or its facilities, including the bus. Adjusting this policy, in most cases, would require local board approval. Additionally, concerns were raised over the liability of students participating in programs not affiliated with the school or school system but serving as alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension.

***“They are our
children no matter
where they reside.”***

- LEA Personnel

Challenges: Shared Resources / Collaboration

Challenges voiced in two of the three working groups included the need for collaboration among local and state agencies. The most prominent area of collaboration exists between the school and the local programming effort. Cooperation is needed to ensure student assignments are forwarded, completed, and returned. Cooperation is also needed to ensure that programs and services, including follow-up services, are offered to qualifying students. One group participant said, “In order for this [programming effort] to be successful...the work must be sent, done, and returned.”

Beyond the initial school – program collaboration, the working groups suggested that collaboration among all agencies and organizations is needed in order to identify existing resources and cross-existing funding challenges to offer effective programs. “There is a lack of resources. We need to collaborate and disclose [the resources we each have] so that we work together on similar projects. We need to build trust,” said a juvenile justice representative. This collaboration in order to share resources was not limited to the juvenile justice and school agencies. The different forum working groups suggested that collaboration with parents, social services (i.e., counseling services), and faith-based organizations is needed to identify existing resources. Given the funding constraints, finding ways to share resources and collaborate to accomplish shared goals was paramount in the minds of the group participants.

Ideas for Realistic Programming: Staff Development

Most of the forum attendees were encouraged by the fact that school systems are being proactive in not using suspensions as “catch-alls” and are striving to have alternatives to suspension. Suggestions to enhance this proactive behavior were offered by juvenile justice and school representatives. “A lack of training exists for in-service teachers and others who serve our youth. To be preventative, most who deal with youth need to understand how to solve problems, not just resort to suspensions,” said a school

representative. Trainings for school staff and others involved with youth in understanding how to work with various learning styles and cultures were suggested. Forum attendees suggested “teachers need to be taught to teach all different learning styles.” It was also suggested that cultural diversity issues and the impact of student suspension in different cultures needed to be addressed.

Ideas for Realistic Programming: Parental Involvement and Student Follow-Up Components

Specific parental involvement and student follow-up components were offered as ideas for realistic programming. Each of the three afternoon working groups felt that in order to be successful, programs must have both strong parental involvement and student follow-up pieces. One school representative said, “We do not always get parental involvement unless it is forced.” The working groups felt strategies for parental involvement, while essential, were best decided according to local needs; therefore no specific strategies were suggested.

Also suggested as an essential piece of alternative to short-term out-of-school suspension programs was student follow-up. Group participants feared without a strong follow-up piece, offering additional guidance to students already participating in alternative to short-term out-of-school suspension programs, the students would continue the same inappropriate behaviors that have lead to discipline action once before. One participant asked, “Is five to ten days enough time to really change behavior?” Offering programs that include strong follow-up components, however, would allow these students to continue to have the guidance they received while participating in the program. Several suggestions on how to accomplish this follow-up were: collaboration with local mental health agencies; participation in local mentoring programs; and use of social workers and school counselors in offering follow-up services to the suspended students.

Ideas for Realistic Programming: Community Involvement

Governor Easley, Secretary Sweat, and other forum speakers outlined the need for a “community” approach including all agencies and their resources in order to realistically offer alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension. Participants in all working groups agreed that input is needed from various groups of stakeholders. A school representative concluded, “No one agency can do it alone.” One working group suggested that this community involvement be secured through a community awareness campaign that would educate citizens from all walks of life on the effects of out-of-school suspensions.

Next Steps: Enhance communication and collaboration between schools and juvenile justice

Accomplishing the “next steps” presented by each group calls for actions to be taken at the state and local level. The local community has been charged with making efforts to enhance the communication and collaboration among school and juvenile justice personnel. “We need to take a holistic approach, no issue should be tackled alone,” said a member of the medium size school system working group.

Participants felt communication was vital for creating a collaborative effort. A lack of trust along with non-disclosure of resources from both viewpoints has led to tension and a lower standard of services for youth. One participant encouraged the group to “not blame each other...that only causes us to lose focus.” Action to strengthen communication and build trust among involved parties will allow existing

resources to be disclosed and shared as school and juvenile justice personnel collaborate to accomplish a shared goal.

Next Steps: Involve other stakeholders, specifically the faith-based community

Participants from all groups cited the need for community involvement in addressing the issue of out-of-school suspension. One participant in the small size school system working group concluded, “The main issue is that these are all our children and we need to begin working together and not compartmentalizing so much.” Enhancement and better utilization of each county’s Juvenile Crime Prevention Council (JCPC) would allow for this involvement. JCPC board members are appointed by county boards of commissioners and include representatives for all areas of the community including school personnel, juvenile justice personnel, law enforcement community members, faith-based community members, youth representatives, and other community representatives. The meetings are open to the public, and all business is considered public information.

Next Steps: Establish uniform discipline guidelines

In the view of juvenile justice personnel working with youth from various schools and school personnel operating various schools in a school system, the establishment of uniform discipline guidelines at the state level would be beneficial. Uniform discipline guidelines would allow the “guess – work” to be taken out of punishments for students breaking school rules. Both perspectives said guidance was needed for principals and superintendents disciplining students. “With juvenile justice, there is so much leeway for the way judges make decisions. The same is true for schools. What is missing is a standard across the board in regards to reasons for short-and long-term suspensions,” said one juvenile justice representative in the medium size school system working group.

Next Steps: Allow flexibility for students and schools in unfunded mandates

The groups also called for action on the part of state leaders. Increased flexibility in mandates involving students and schools was requested. “We are told to serve the population but we cannot do this without resources,” said one participant. Representatives in the large size school system working group felt “we need better management of resources and local solutions to a statewide problem.” Participants in all groups felt that increased flexibility in regards to transportation, service of all students, and program facilities would allow schools and community organizations to work through funding issues.

Conclusion

While the participants of the October forum discussed many issues relating to alternatives to short-term out-of-school suspension, all agreed that a need exists. Students are losing class time and therefore instructional time. There is a need to address this issue now at local and state levels. Participants met the call for action set forth by Governor Easley, Attorney General Cooper, Secretary Sweat, Deputy Superintendent Sneed, and Senator Carter with interest and enthusiasm. The state must provide energy for local action. As Governor Easley said, the stakes are high because “North Carolina cannot succeed without our youth succeeding.”

***“North Carolina
cannot succeed
without our youth
succeeding.”***

***- North Carolina Governor
Mike Easley***