

Hello, my name is Alberto Morales. I am an educator in the Portland Public Schools system and have been an educator in several districts for the last 20+ years. I have learned many things in my time as an educator, but one of the most clear is that suspensions don't work. The work of educating is the work of keeping kids in schools. That getting to know our young people and forming relationships, along with best practices in "classroom management" equals classrooms that almost never require the "nuclear option" of suspension or expulsion. That even detention as we commonly understand it is outdated and ineffective. If we start from the principles of what is best for the student and to "do no harm", then it becomes unequivocally clear that these traditional methods of responding to normal student behaviors no longer have a place in our education system.

Although suspension is one of the most widely used school discipline responses, school officials and education experts increasingly criticize suspension and its negative effects on both suspended students and schools as a whole. Fortunately, alternatives exist that can improve student behavior, maintain school safety, and enhance academic achievement. These are effective approaches to student misconduct that minimize exclusion of children from school.

Many of these approaches are already used in Maine schools; others are used in communities around the country. Many have been rigorously studied and shown to have positive results.

There are no significant costs to moving away from this harmful practice; to the contrary, using more effective approaches to problem behaviors can reduce the likelihood of unemployment, court involvement and other negative outcomes with high societal price tags, therefore there is also financial wisdom in this.

Identifying alternatives to suspension is a critical step in preventing and reducing suspensions, but it is only a first step. Ultimately we should all be striving for and making decisions as practitioners and policymakers from across the political spectrum to pursue strategies that keep schools and communities safe while also providing all students with the support they need.

Frequent use of suspension has many undesirable and unintended outcomes, including a less healthy school environment, lower academic achievement, higher levels of disruptive or antisocial behavior, and higher school dropout rates.

The most troubling aspect of this practice is the disproportionate impact it has on students with disabilities and our BIPOC students, particularly our Black students. Also of urgent concern is the criminalization of students; far too many referrals to the juvenile system come from schools.

Overuse of suspension is a problem individual schools and districts can address by replacing suspension with alternatives backed by research. When implemented properly and with full support, these alternatives can simultaneously diminish the negative outcomes of harmful discipline policies, boost student achievement, and improve school discipline. When schools and school districts pursue alternatives to suspension with seriousness and rigor, the results can be dramatically positive, both for individual students and for the school community.

There are many alternatives, including, but not limited to

- PBIS
- Safe and Responsive Schools (SRS)
- Professional Development support for teachers

- Reducing the role of SROs
- Objective Threat Assessment
- Restorative Justice
- Community Service Programs
- Community School Partnerships
- Substance Abuse Interventions
- Alternative Schools

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) - PBIS is a set of strategies and techniques based in behavioral psychology and implemented by all staff throughout a school. A positive approach is taken to create specific behavioral expectations for all students, and desired behaviors are explicitly taught. More intensive strategies are used for the children who need the most support. Data are kept and monitored to allow for more effective and targeted implementation.

The Maine Department of Education continues to partner with the University of Maine system to provide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) training and coaching.

Thank you for your time and for listening. I am one of many educators who oppose school suspensions. We know it is harmful. We know it is ineffective. It is time to end this practice.

