

## Exploring Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspension in Kentucky: A quasi-experimental study examining the effectiveness of Community service work

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### Recommended Citation

May, D. C., Stokes, E., Oliver, A., & McClure, T. (2015). Exploring Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspension in Kentucky: A quasi-experimental study examining the effectiveness of Community service work. *PRISM: A Journal of Regional Engagement*, 4 (1). Retrieved from <http://encompass.eku.edu/prism/vol4/iss1/2>

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors would like to thank the Kentucky Center for School Safety for allowing access to the data analyzed here. Any views and opinions presented here are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Kentucky Center for School Safety.

## **Exploring Alternatives To Out-Of-School Suspension In Kentucky: A Quasi-Experimental Study Examining The Effectiveness Of Community Service Work<sup>1</sup>**

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*This paper addresses the ineffective and often negative impacts that various forms of disciplinary measures have on students (e.g. out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension, and placement in alternative schools) then discusses community service as a viable alternative to these programs. Data from 17 middle and high schools in Kentucky that implemented community service in lieu of suspension are compared to data from 17 control schools to explore whether or not community service programs are effective in reducing school suspensions. The findings illustrate that community service programs are effective in reducing the amount of out-of-school suspensions in those schools that use community service programs. Therefore, the authors suggest that implementing community service works as a viable alternative to in-school or out-of-school suspensions has the potential to improve academic performance and conduct within public school settings.*

*Keywords: Alternative to suspension, Community service, School discipline, Suspension*

Creating a safe school environment is an important goal for all school officials. One of the most widely used methods to assist with this goal is the use of out-of-school suspension as a disciplinary action for students that violate school rules. However, over the years, the use of out-of-school suspension to address student misbehavior has been shown to negatively impact schools, students, and communities (Brownstein, 2010; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Fabelo et al., 2011; Garibaldi, 1980; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Morgan-D'Atrio, Northrup, LaFleur, & Spera, 1996; Raffaele-Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Toby & Scrupski, 1991).

To address these concerns, many districts have developed alternatives to suspensions, as suggested by various scholars and organizations (United States Department of Education (USDOE), 2014). Examples of these alternatives include in-school suspension, alternative school placement, cognitive skills training, and specialized programming. While these are some of the most popular alternatives used by school administrators, the use of community service work (CSW) as both a disciplinary consequence and learning experience is an emerging method for curbing high suspension rates. Proponents claim that CSW is both a way for schools to reduce suspension and a way for students to become involved in their communities.

In this study, we explore the effectiveness of CSW as an alternative to suspension by conducting a quasi-experimental design experiment. In this experiment, we compare 17 schools that utilized a CSW program with 17 comparable schools that did not to examine the impact of CSW as an alternative to suspension for board and law violations over an

11-year period. The results from this study suggest that CSW reduces the number of out-of-school suspensions for both board and law violations and may have a dramatic effect in this area. However, this effect appears to be short-lived after the CSW program ends, and things often return to normal relatively quickly thereafter.

### **Out of School Suspensions**

In 2006, over 3.3 million students were suspended from public elementary and secondary schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), even though there is no evidence to demonstrate that suspensions are effective in changing the behavior of the students (Brownstein, 2010; Crone & Horner, 2012; Henderson & Friedland, 1996). In fact, most research suggests that suspension rarely benefits the student being disciplined. Concerns raised by use of out-of-school suspension include: a) out-of-school suspensions alone are ineffective in changing student behavior (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Garibaldi, 1980; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Morgan-D'Atrio et al., 1996; Raffaele-Mendez et al., 2002; Toby & Scrupski, 1991); b) time out of school is often unproductive as many youth are unsupervised, placing the student and community at risk, and negating the penalty involved with the out-of-school suspension; c) students who are suspended are more likely to fall behind academically, increasing the possibility that schools will not meet their academic goals or that the student will drop out (Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2007; Council on School Health, 2013; DeRidder, 1991; Morgan-D'Atrio et al., 1996); and d) the number of minority students suspended and expelled is disproportionate to their overall numbers in the student population (Barnhart, Franklin, & Alleman 2008; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Dupper, 1994; Finn & Servoss, 2013; Radin, 1989; Raffaele-Mendez et al., 2002; Uchitelle, Bartz, & Hillman, 1989). Out-of-school suspension thus hinders the educational process by causing students to fall behind their peers academically due to loss of instructional time and may differentially impact minority students (Dupper, 1994; Henderson & Friedland, 1996; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Mattison, 2004; Radin, 1989; Raffaele-Mendez et al., 2002; Uchitelle et al., 1989).

Out-of-school suspension also reduces the support that students are given in school environments because their teachers, administrators, and peers are not present—this reduced support increases the likelihood of a student dropping out of school altogether (Brownstein, 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011; 2010; Henderson & Friedland, 1996). Repeated removal through out-of-school suspensions may also make a student frustrated with school, distancing them from positive school interaction and a sense of belonging in their school environment. Out-of-school suspension thus may drive the at-risk student away instead of helping them to cope with (and resolve) the underlying problems that led to the suspensions (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Fabelo et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Neeld, 1999).

### **Alternatives to Suspension**

Because of the ineffectiveness of out-of-school suspension as a disciplinary action, a number of programs have been developed as alternatives to suspension. Lamont and colleagues (2013) suggest that effective alternatives to suspension programs should have three important characteristics. First, these programs should implement intervention strategies and supports for children at the pre-school level. Second, reducing out of school suspensions requires increased assistance and specialized programming for students that come from less fortunate socioeconomic situations that are at a higher risk of problematic behavior (both academically and disciplinarily). Finally, programs designed to reduce

out of school suspensions should implement and reevaluate annual codes of conduct that vary by the age of the schoolchildren. The aforementioned strategies for identifying and predicting problematic behaviors in school are essential components of the approach known as the School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SWBS). When properly used, the SWBS approach is very effective at reducing the likelihood of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and school dropouts (Lamont et al., 2013).

As noted earlier, many school districts use alternatives to out-of-school suspension. The most popular of these programs is in-school suspension (ISS). Normally, an ISS would precede an out-of-school suspension or expulsion. Students receiving ISS typically report to an isolated room where they work on their assignments from their regular teachers. Students typically do not leave until the end of the day; lunch is often brought to the room. The adults supervising the students answer questions related only to the student's assignments and do not engage in other forms of conversation with the student. This program does isolate disruptive students from their classmates, but does so in a school setting and keeps the offending students off the streets and in school (Morris & Howard, 2003; Radin, 1989).

A key component of any ISS program is the person that is assigned to monitor the program. This monitor can attempt to establish personal connections with the students, encourage them, and express to them that they have a worthwhile place in society. Many researchers believe that the monitor should have counseling, special education, and social work experience (Morris & Howard, 2003). Other important elements the program should possess are: isolation from the student population, operative procedures for student assignments, and professional intervention by a counselor. ISS programs accomplish the goal of removing the student from the classroom setting but do not reward the students for bad behavior by giving them a vacation from school (Vanderslice, 1999). ISS programs have proven to be more successful in reducing suspensions than out-of-school suspensions because out-of-school suspensions often cause students to further resent school rules when they are suspended from school property (Cooper, 2014; DeRidder, 1991; Morris & Howard, 2003).

Another type of program that has emerged as an alternative to suspension is Saturday School (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Pratt, 2011). Saturday School programs typically require students to arrive early on a Saturday morning, complete academic exercises and tutoring sessions, write essays on discipline, and participate in behavior improvement activities (Pratt, 2011; Winborn, 1992). Saturday School programs can include features such as physical labor, academic work, counseling, and detention. Some Saturday Schools have been established as a way to deal with suspensions without losing revenue through Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funds. Students are typically assigned to Saturday School by the principal or assistant principal, not by classroom teachers. Parents are also made aware of the fact that their child had been assigned Saturday School so arrangements can be made to insure the child's attendance. Winborn (1992) described a Saturday School program that was implemented in a Tennessee middle school. The program lasted for three hours on Saturday morning and included two hours of academic work and one hour devoted to behavior improvement (e.g., discussion, role-playing, viewing a video). Winborn (1992) determined that the Saturday school program reduced both corporal punishments and out-of-school suspensions during the time that it operated.

Some programs designed as alternatives to suspension target a more specific area of

interest, serving one population of students that commit a specific board or law policy violation. One specific alternative to suspension program like this is a Tobacco Education Program. This program targets students who have gotten in trouble for one specific offense: the use of tobacco products. One example of a Tobacco Education program is the Tobacco Alternative to Suspension (TATS) program. TATS is a partnership between a children's hospital, the local school district, and a county tobacco free coalition in Florida designed to enhance the student's knowledge of the effects of tobacco products. This three-hour program is used for first-time offenders caught using tobacco on or within 1,000 feet of school grounds. Rules for this class are similar to those of ISS and Saturday School programs. The student must arrive on time, participate in all activities, abide by the Student Code of Conduct, and must not act disruptive during the class or they will be removed. The students are given a completion form once they have attended the class. A similar program in Palm Beach School district in Florida refers students to smoking cessation classes designed specifically for adolescents that are provided by counseling agencies in the local community (School District of Palm Beach County Florida, 2013). Tobacco reduction programs can be effective in reducing tobacco use, but mostly assist in providing discipline for the specific area of violation (Neeld, 1999).

Another popular alternative to suspension is an alternative education center, more commonly referred to as an alternative school. In some districts, students are given the choice between out-of-school suspension and alternative school attendance. The student's decision to attend alternative school often gives the student a feeling of ownership and commitment to the school because they made the choice to go there. Alternative schools are often successful because they focus more on social, emotional, personal, and academic development and less on punishment. There are fewer students in an alternative setting, allowing for more individual attention than a regular school setting. The teachers are an important part of the alternative school structure, because they have the ability to develop warm, caring relationships with the students. Ideally, alternative schools also encourage a supportive peer culture so that students will not only be encouraged by teachers, but will encourage each other as well (Christenson & Thurlow; 2004; Radin, 1989).

Teachers in these programs have expanded roles, serving as advisors, mentors, and counselors in addition to their educational roles. The smaller classes in alternative schools facilitate the greater individual attention mentioned previously. Counseling is an important part of the alternative education curriculum, helping students deal with problems in their lives as well as problems they may have at school. Teachers are given flexibility in crafting strategies to meet the needs of their students. Another important feature in alternative schools is parental and community involvement (Christle et al., 2007; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1995). These types of environments contribute widely to student success. At-risk students often seek out these types of environments that they do not get to experience in the regular school setting.

Alternative school programs are controversial for a number of reasons, including (a) they typically have higher enrollments of students of color than traditional school settings, (b) coursework is often less challenging than traditional coursework, (c) graduation rates are often lower in these schools than in traditional schools, and (d) alternative school settings bring deviant peers together, which may increase delinquency, substance use, and problem behaviors (Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014). Nevertheless, Morgan et al. (2014) review a number of studies of alternative school programs and argue that,

when properly funded, staffed, designed, and delivered, alternative school programs can be effective in both reducing out of school suspension and improving academic performance (Morgan et al., 2014).

Another example of an alternative to suspension program is a student advisory center. The Student Advisory Center (SAC) concept is one brought about by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). The NAESP believes that both in-school and out-of-school suspension programs do little to actually change the student's attitudes and behaviors that resulted in his or her placement in the program in the first place. The SAC concept focuses on supporting the students and helping them learn how to make positive changes in their behavior. This program also aspires to promote academic success and build the self-esteem of the student. The SAC model focuses on positive reinforcement and teaching students to acknowledge responsibility for their own actions. Students in SAC receive counseling and one-on-one instruction, much like that provided in an alternative school (Sanders, 2000). Staff members and students work together in the SAC to set behavioral goals and objectives for their time in the program and develop an action plan for success. The goal of this SAC is to help students improve their academic skills as well as their behavioral skills in an effort to make them a successful and productive citizen of their school and community (Sanders, 2000).

Although there are many types of alternative to suspension programs, there are certain components that are essential to make each alternative to suspension program a success. According to MacWilliams (1992), it is important to develop a continuum of problem-solving levels to be imposed prior to an out-of-school suspension. Examples of alternatives to suspension that could be used include time-out areas, group counseling, therapeutic discipline, in-school suspension, or combinations of each. These strategies provide a continuum of services to improve student behavior rather than merely identifying and punishing unacceptable behaviors (MacWilliams, 1992; Osher, Bear, & Sprague, 2010; USDOE, 2014).

### **Community Service Work Programs**

Community service work (CSW) is another potential alternative that can be used to alleviate some of the problems of out-of-school suspension. In CSW programs, students may be required to participate in CSW either as a substitute for out-of-school suspension or as an additional component of another alternative to out-of-school suspension (e.g., CSW as part of ISS or a Saturday school). CSW is a supervised and structured work experience for youth designed to meet community needs and foster the student's responsibility for personal actions. Some, like Toby & Scrupski (1991), have advocated the use of CSW programs since the late 1980's, pointing to their potential to discipline the student, remove him or her from the classroom, and provide a learning experience at the same time. However, it is not certain how widespread CSW is in the school system. Few studies have directly evaluated the effectiveness of CSW programs.

A number of alternatives to suspension programs list CSW as one of their components; two examples of those programs that used CSW as a disciplinary procedure are described here. The first used CSW as part of an alternative school program (Denner, Coyle, Robin, & Banspach, 2005). In this program, CSW was used as a learning tool for students placed in an alternative school. Denner and colleagues (2005) focused on one aspect of the program: the use of CSW in AIDS organizations to supplement HIV and pregnancy prevention

curriculum. Their conclusions about the effectiveness of the program, however, described the effects of participation in a wide variety of CSW activities, including working with the elderly and creating a mural in the community. The authors noted that the students, teachers, and organizations all benefited from the various types of CSW in general and concluded that a CSW component can be assimilated into a HIV/pregnancy prevention program. However, they were not able to present any empirical evidence ascertaining whether or not the program actually prevented HIV and pregnancy among the student participants, nor were they able to present any empirical evidence that CSW reduced suspensions among the students (Denner et al., 2005).

A second program that used CSW to replace out-of-school suspension was mentioned briefly in an article describing a review of a school's discipline policies (Malesich, 1994). In this review, students, teachers, parents, and administrators collaborated to design policies that used alternatives to suspension including CSW, Saturday School, and a youth court as discipline procedures. Nevertheless, there was no indication in this article or any other available articles regarding the effectiveness of CSW as an alternative to suspension program (Malesich, 1994).

Despite the lack of research on the effectiveness of CSW in reducing discipline problems, there is limited empirical evidence that CSW helps promote pro-social attitudes and personal growth. Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates (1999) found that involvement in CSW predicted avoidance of deviant behaviors such as marijuana use in a nationally representative sample of high school students. Middleton & Kelly (1996) compared 80 high school students that participated in CSW with 65 that did not. They determined that although qualitative data suggested that students who participated in CSW grew behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally as a result of their service, they were not quantitatively different than the students that did not participate in CSW on self-esteem or social interest after CSW participation (Middleton & Kelly, 1996).

Consequently, despite limited evidence that CSW may foster personal growth and prevent deviance, it is uncertain if the same results will occur as the result of CSW when used as a disciplinary technique. Thus, more evaluative research is needed to resolve this uncertainty. This research begins an effort to fill that void. In this study, we seek to determine whether or not the implementation of CSW programs in 17 schools in six districts in the state of Kentucky resulted in a successful reduction in the number of suspensions both during the implementation of the CSW program and over seven years after the program was no longer funded. In this study, we use a quasi-experimental design to determine whether schools in these districts had greater reductions in out-of-school suspensions over an 11-year period than a sample of comparison schools that did not implement CSW as an alternative to suspension.

Based on the preceding review, we expected to find that the schools that implemented CSW will have significantly fewer out-of-school suspensions than their counterparts that did not during the implementation of the program because the districts have now been given an alternative to suspending students, which we believe will result in a reduction of the number of suspensions (in their districts) over that time period.

## **Method**

In the spring of 2003, the Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) was contracted by the Kentucky Department of Education to solicit proposals from Kentucky school



districts to explore the use of CSW as an alternative to suspension. After a competitive grant process, six school districts in Kentucky were selected to receive funding for a CSW Program in which students were required to perform CSW in lieu of being suspended from school. These schools implemented CSW in lieu of suspension in the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years. According to the funding criteria, students in the program also had to complete homework assignments and receive counseling from the school counselor as part of the program. The aim of this program was to give districts an opportunity to reduce suspension rates and increase their average daily attendance (ADA) revenue.

While each program varied in its design by district, students typically spent half of each day engaged in CSW and the other half on academic assignments and working closely with the school counselor to discuss the causes and consequences of their misbehavior that led to the student's involvement in the program. For students to take part in the program, their parents had to agree that the student could participate in CSW in lieu of suspension. Students who completed the programs received both academic and attendance credit. Each individual district designated the actual CSW tasks. Some districts had students who stayed to work on school grounds, while others sent students to work with outside agencies including soup kitchens, animal shelters, Goodwill stores, and care centers for children or adults. Students that participated in these programs did not receive a suspension mark on their records and they also were not counted as absent for that school day.

### **Data Collection and Research Design**

Despite our recommendations to do so, none of the school administrators chose to randomly assign some of the students who committed infractions that qualified them for out-of-school suspension to CSW; as such, the optimal experimental design (using random assignment and control and experimental groups) was impossible to conduct.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we chose to use the most valid "quasi-experimental design" available given the parameters of the data.

The design that we used is referred to as the "control-series" design (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1982), one of a series of interrupted time series analyses. In this design, the group receiving the intervention was compared with a similar group in both pretest and posttest observations. This method helps to eliminate alternative explanations for the relationship between the treatment (in this case, the CSW program) and the effect (in this case, reductions in out-of-school suspensions). If those schools receiving the intervention show greater improvement than those schools that did not receive the intervention, then we can have some confidence that intervention was successful.

To begin the comparison, we identified the schools in each district that used CSW as an alternative to suspension. Among the six districts, 17 middle and high schools used the CSW program. We then established a group of schools that did not receive the intervention to compare with the group of experimental schools that actually used CSW. To establish this comparison group, we first identified the enrollment numbers of each school that used CSW. Then, using Kentucky census data, we determined the population size of the counties in which each school was located. Next, we found districts/counties from areas in Kentucky with similar demographics (e.g., percent nonwhite, median household income) and, within those districts, selected schools with comparable enrollments as those of the 17 schools under study. These 17 schools became the comparison group for this study.

## Dependent Variables

To begin our analysis, we collected the number of suspensions and the enrollments for each of the 34 schools (17 schools that implemented CSW programs in 2003-2004 and 17 schools chosen as comparison schools). Using enrollment and suspension data provided by the Kentucky Center for School Safety for each year between the 2000-2001 school year (the first year for which valid data were available) and the 2011-2012 school year (the most recent school year readily available at the time of this analysis), we were able to calculate the annual suspension rates for both board violations and law violations for each school during that time frame. These data were collected by the Kentucky Department of Education from individual schools throughout the state and provided to the Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) at the end of each school year to be reported in the Kentucky Safe Schools Data Report. Suspensions at each school are reported to the KCSS based on two separate types of violations: a law violation or a board policy violation. A law violation occurs when a law is broken (assault, rape, robbery, etc.) whereas a board policy violation occurs where a “rule” set by a school board has been violated (defiance of authority, cheating, dress code violation, fighting, etc.). We thus ran two sets of analyses to examine differences between experimental and control groups, one to address suspensions due to law violations and one to address suspensions due to board policy violations.

To begin our analysis, we coded those schools that utilized CSW in lieu of suspension as (1) and the comparison schools as (0). Next, we calculated the average suspension rate for board and law violations at each school for three time periods. These time periods included the three years prior to the implementation of the CSW program (from 2000-2001 to 2002-2003); the two years in which the CSW program was implemented (2003-04 to 2004-05); and the seven years after the schools received funding (2005-06 to 2011-2012). Then, using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS), we conducted an independent sample t-test for each of the three time periods to determine if the changes in suspension rates from 2000-2001 to 2011-2012 for board violations and the law violations were significantly different between the experimental and control schools. The results of those analyses are presented in Tables 1 through 6 below.

## Results

Table 1

*Comparison of Average Suspension Rates (per 1,000 students) for Board Violations for CSW and Comparison Schools Prior to CSW Program (2000-01 to 2002-2003)*

School Group	N	Mean Yearly Suspension Rates	Std. Deviation
CSW Schools	17	362.96	211.23
Comparison Schools	17	108.18	99.01
t-value (df)	-4.503 (32)***		

\*p<.05

\*\*p<.01

\*\*\*p<.001

In Table 1, we present a comparison of the average suspension rates for board violations from the 2000-2001 school year to the 2002-2003 school year for both the schools implementing CSW and the comparison schools. The results presented in Table 1 indicate that schools using CSW had an average annual suspension rate of 362.96

suspensions (per 1,000 students) for board policy violations while schools that did not use CSW (the comparison group) had an average annual suspension rate of 108.18 out of school suspensions for board policy violations prior to the implementation of the CSW program. The results suggest that the difference in suspensions between the two groups was statistically significant ( $t=-4.503$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Thus, prior to the implementation of the CSW program, the groups of schools that implemented CSW in lieu of suspension in the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years had significantly more out-of-schools suspensions for board violations than the group of comparison schools that did not implement CSW.

Table 2

*Comparison of Average Suspension Rates (per 1,000 students) for Law Violations for CSW and Comparison Schools Prior to CSW Program (2000-01 to 2002-2003)*

School Group	N	Mean Yearly Suspension Rates	Std. Deviation
CSW Schools	17	32.19	23.54
Comparison Schools	17	19.28	18.41
t-value (df)	-1.781 (32)		

\* $p<.05$ \*\* $p<.01$ \*\*\* $p<.001$ 

In Table 2, we present a comparison of the average out-of-school suspension rates for law violations from the 2000-2001 school year to the 2002-2003 school year for both the schools implementing CSW and the comparison schools. The results presented in Table 2 indicate that schools using CSW had an annual average of 32.19 out-of-school suspensions (per 1,000 students) for law violations while schools that did not use CSW (the comparison group) had an average of 19.28 out-of-school suspensions for law violations per year prior to the implementation of the CSW program. Although the group of CSW schools had, on average, higher suspension rates for law violations than the group of comparison schools prior to the implementation of the CSW program, this difference was not statistically significant ( $t=-1.781$ ).

Table 3

*Comparison of Average Suspension Rates (per 1,000 students) for Board Violations for CSW and Comparison Schools during Implementation of CSW Program (2003-04 to 2004-2005)*

School Group	N	Mean Yearly Suspensions	Std. Deviation
CSW Schools	17	227.92	156.53
Comparison Schools	17	153.78	142.63
t-value (df)	-1.443 (32)		

\* $p<.05$ 

In Table 3, we present a comparison of the average annual out-of-school suspension rates for board violations from the 2003-2004 school year to the 2004-2005 school year (the two years in which the CSW program was implemented) for both the schools implementing

CSW and the comparison schools. The results presented in Table 3 indicate that schools using CSW had an annual average suspension rate of 227.92 out-of-school suspensions (per 1,000 students) for board policy violations while schools that did not use CSW had an annual average of 153.78 out of school suspensions for board policy violations during the implementation of the CSW program. Thus, the schools that utilized the CSW program had a 37% reduction in annual suspension rates for board violations while suspensions in the schools not using CSW increased almost 50% (from approximately 108 to 154 per year). With the marked decrease in suspensions in the CSW schools, the difference in out-of-school suspension rates between the CSW schools and the comparison schools was no longer statistically significant ( $t=-1.443$ ,  $p=.159$ ).

Table 4

*Comparison of Average Suspension Rates (per 1,000 students) for Law Violations for CSW and Comparison Schools during Implementation of CSW Program (2003-04 to 2004-2005)*

School Group	N	Mean Yearly Suspensions	Std. Deviation
CSW Schools	17	14.06	10.92
Comparison Schools	17	11.66	16.50
t-value (df)	-.501 (32)		

\* $p<.05$

In Table 4, we present a comparison of the average annual out-of-school suspension rates for law violations from the 2003-2004 school year to the 2004-2005 school year for both the schools implementing CSW and the comparison schools. The results presented in Table 4 indicate that schools using CSW had an average annual suspension rate of 14.06 out-of-school suspensions for law violations while schools that did not use CSW had an average annual suspension rate of 11.66 out of school suspensions for law violations during the implementation of the CSW program. Although both groups of schools experienced a marked decrease in suspensions for law violations from the years prior to the implementation of the CSW Program, the group of CSW schools, on average, continued to have higher suspension rates for law violations than the group of comparison schools prior to the implementation of the CSW program. This difference was not statistically significant ( $t=-.501$ ,  $p=.620$ ).

Table 5

*Comparison of Average Suspension Rates (per 1,000 students) for Board Violations for CSW and Comparison Schools After CSW Program (2005-2006 to 2011-2012)*

School Group	N	Mean Yearly Suspensions	Std. Deviation
CSW Schools	17	157.45	86.82
Comparison Schools	17	138.26	106.24
t-value (df)	-.577 (32)		

\* $p<.05$

In Table 5, we present a comparison of the average annual of out-of-school suspension

rates for board violations from the 2005-2006 school year to the 2011-2012 school year (the seven years after the CSW program was implemented) for both the schools implementing CSW and the comparison schools. The results presented in Table 5 indicate that schools using CSW had an annual average suspension rate of 157.45 out-of-school suspensions (per 1,000 students) for board policy violations per year while schools that did not use CSW (the comparison group) had an annual average suspension rate of 138.26 out of school suspensions for board policy violations after the implementation of the CSW program. Thus, suspensions in the schools that utilized the CSW program rose slightly after the CSW experiment ended (but not nearly to their pre-program levels) while suspension rates in the schools not using CSW increased to a level higher than their pre-program level (from approximately 109 per year to approximately 138 per year, a 26.7% increase). With the increased suspension rates in both groups of schools, the difference in out-of-school suspensions between the CSW schools and the comparison schools was not statistically significant ( $t=-.577$ ,  $p=.568$ ).

Table 6  
*Comparison of Average Suspension Rates (per 1,000 students) for Law Violations for CSW and Comparison Schools After CSW Program (2005-2006 to 2011-2012)*

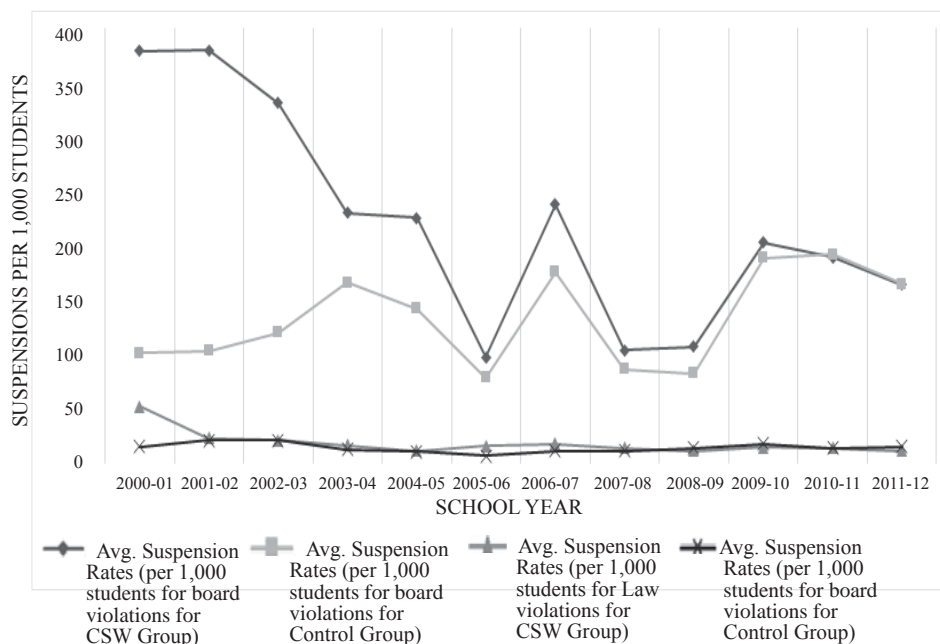
School Group	N	Mean Yearly Suspensions	Std. Deviation
CSW Schools	17	14.07	9.67
Comparison Schools	17	13.04	14.99
t-value (df)	-.239 (32)		

\* $p<.05$

In Table 6, we present a comparison of the annual average out-of-school suspension rates for law violations from the 2005-2006 school year to the 2011-2012 school year for both the schools implementing CSW and the comparison schools. The results presented in Table 6 indicate that schools using CSW had an annual average suspension rate of 14.07 out-of-school suspensions (per 1,000 students) for law violations while schools that did not use CSW (the comparison group) had an annual average suspension rate of 13.04 out of school suspensions for law violations after the implementation of the CSW program. The difference in annual average suspension rates for law violations between the two groups was not statistically significant ( $t=-.239$ ,  $p=.813$ ).

In Figure 1 below, we have graphed the average suspension rates for board and law violations over the 12 years under study. The data presented in the figure provides a graphic display of the tables discussed above. In sum, there is a marked decrease of the average number of board suspensions in schools implementing CSW from 2000-01 to 2005-06; after that time period, the average suspension rates for the CSW schools remain lower than they were prior to the CSW implementation and rate fluctuations generally mirror those of the non-CSW school. The average suspension rates for board violations in the schools that did not implement CSW increase slightly over the 12 year period, while average suspension rates for law violations for both CSW and control school remain relatively stable across the 12-year period.

Figure 1  
Average Annual Suspension Rates (per 1,000 students) For CSW and Control Schools-2000-01 to 2011-12



## Discussion

The results presented in this paper suggest that the CSW projects implemented in lieu of suspension in the selected Kentucky schools were successful in reducing out-of-school suspensions for both board and law violations in the experimental schools, at least during the two-year implementation period. This impact was greater for board violations than for law violations, which makes sense given the fact that board violations occur much more frequently and, given their seriousness, students engaged in many law violations would not qualify for CSW under the requirements of the program. Thus, by and large, the results presented here suggest that CSW in lieu of suspension reduces suspensions and should be considered as one strategy to increase instructional time while maintaining a positive, safe, school environment.

To our knowledge, this is the first study that uses a quasi-experimental design to examine the effect of using CSW in lieu of out of school suspensions as a form of discipline. As presented earlier, there are a wide variety of alternatives to suspension programs available. We recommend that CSW be added to that “toolbox” of strategies that principals can use to discipline students.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Nevertheless, before accepting that recommendation on its own merit, there are a number of limitations and suggestions for future research that should be considered. First, analysis of out-of-school suspensions in Kentucky public schools over the time period under consideration here shows that there was a 19.5% decrease in suspensions across

the state during the time period, dropping from 75,442 during 2000-01 to 60,744 during 2011-2012 (McCoy-Simandle & May, 2002; Division of Student Success, 2012). Thus, the increases in out-of-school suspensions after the implementation of the CSW program (for both CSW and comparison schools) were not typical of the schools throughout the state. Consequently, it may be the case that the schools under study here were not representative of the public schools in Kentucky during this time period. Nevertheless, the fact that the reduction in out-of-school suspensions was significantly greater in the CSW schools than the comparison schools suggest that at least part of that difference may have been due to the CSW program.

A second limitation of this study is that we have little information about the types of CSW in which students were involved at the school level. Our interviews with the staff responsible for supervising the program during 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years indicated that some students were working with nonprofits in the community (e.g., American Red Cross, the local humane society) while others were engaged in CSW on the local school campus. We suspect that those programs in which students work with community nonprofits will be more effective in changing behavior than those programs where students work on-campus. At this point, however, that is purely conjecture. Consequently, in addition to comparing differences between schools using CSW and schools using traditional out-of-school suspension programs, future research should explore differences in the type of programs used to determine if some CSW programs are more effective than others.

A third limitation of this research is also worth mentioning. Based on these results, we are confident that CSW reduces the number of out-of-school suspensions, particularly for board violations. However, we do not know *why* it does. It could be that, as part of their CSW or the counseling that is part of that program, students realize something about themselves or their situation that inspires them to change their attitude and behaviors and make them less likely to misbehave in the future than they were in the past. It could also be, however, that students do not want to take part in a program where they actually have to talk to a counselor *and* perform out-of-class labor, some of which may be physical labor. Answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this study but certainly should be considered in future research replicating these efforts.

A fourth limitation revolves around the sample studied here. In total, we examined the impact of CSW as an alternative to suspension in 17 schools in one Midwestern state. Thus, the generalizability of the findings presented here is limited at best. Nevertheless, we believe that this exploratory effort is an important contribution, not only because of the results presented here, but also because of the questions raised for future research. We hope that this research will serve as a foundation for more generalizable research in the future.

The final limitation of this study involves our limited ability to control for spurious variables that may have contributed to the reduction in out-of-school suspensions in the treatment schools, or conversely, may have contributed to an increase in out-of-school suspensions in the control schools. The research question we attempted to answer in this question was whether or not CSW used in lieu of out-of-school suspension reduced the number of suspensions in the schools that used it and whether that reduction was greater in those schools than in similar schools that did not use CSW. The results presented here suggest that the answer to that question is a qualified yes. Nevertheless, as highlighted earlier, we still do not know why CSW reduces suspensions. Furthermore, we cannot argue definitively that it does (1) without further information about the students and programs at

the individual schools using CSW or (2) without the ability to control for other spurious factors that might have caused reductions in suspensions were the CSW program not in place. To some extent, the use of a comparison group of schools offsets this concern but future research should improve on this design by closely following schools using CSW over an extended period of time to provide further credence to the findings presented here.

### **Conclusion and Policy Impact**

The controversy surrounding use of out-of-school suspension continues to plague schools and their administrators. One option to reduce those concerns may be CSW. CSW is a valuable tool in finding an alternative to suspension for students that may commit an offense warranting suspension. From the findings presented in this study of CSW and its effect on suspensions in schools, it is clear that public school administrators can use this as a tool to reducing suspensions and thereby increase funding that schools received based on their average daily attendance (ADA). We would encourage public school administrators to seek additional funding from government agencies and private foundations to allow them to provide these CSW programs in additional schools in the future. In the analyses presented here, only 17 schools in 6 school districts were able to participate in these valuable programs to reduce suspensions. Based on their effectiveness in reducing suspensions demonstrated in this study, we recommend that CSW be considered as an alternative to out-of-school suspension to provide a more effective way to address student misbehavior.

In reality, CSW in lieu of out-of-school suspension serves at least three important functions. First, and most importantly, rather than forcing a student out of school (often to an unsupervised setting), CSW programs provide students the ability to spend that time working on their school assignments, talking with a trained professional about the causes and consequences of their behavior, and assisting their community or school by providing service to those that need it. Intuitively, each of these components of CSW is an improvement on out-of-school suspension. Secondly, by maintaining supervision of the student during the school day, the student is no longer counted as absent (as they would be in an out-of-school suspension), thus allowing the school to retain the funding for that student rather than lose funding for the time the student is absent because of the suspension. In reality, in schools with high numbers of out-of-school suspensions, the funding retained by allowing these students to stay under the school's supervision would fund one or more licensed counselors to be responsible for the administration of the program (e.g., counseling with students, arranging work with agencies and transportation of students to those agencies, coordinating homework assignments with teachers). Finally, CSW provides school administrators with one more option to avoid out-of-school suspensions. Any effort to keep students in school that does not increase school misbehavior or decrease academic performance or school safety, in our opinion, is an effort worthy of consideration.

Nevertheless, the use of CSW is only one of a variety of alternatives to out-of-school suspension that are available. Both the United States Department of Education (2014) and the Council of State Governments Justice Center (Morgan et al., 2014) provide a number of recommendations for reducing use of out-of-school suspensions. Some of these guiding principles include building staff capacity through education and training; conducting regular evaluations of school discipline practices and policies to insure they are treating students of all classes, races, abilities, and genders equitably; training teachers and staff to deliver discipline in ways that are consistent and equitable; and using data-driven strategies



to improve school climate and culture by gathering data from all interested parties (parents, citizens, students, teachers, and administrators). Each of these recommendations would make an important contribution to school safety and discipline and we join these groups in calling for these strategies.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The authors of this article used data analyzed herein for analysis in a chapter on Community Service Works as an Alternative to Suspension published as part of a larger work entitled *School Safety in the United States: A Reasoned Look at the Rhetoric* by Carolina Academic Press.

<sup>2</sup>In addition to being unable to randomly assign students to either the CSW or non-CSW group, we were also unable to collect data about the individual students assigned to either program. Thus, we were unable to determine whether youths were suspended again after they received the initial disciplinary action that brought about the CSW consequence or the out-of-school suspension. Consequently, all analyses reported here are school-level analyses rather than individual-level analyses.

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### **Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to thank Jon Akers and LeeAnn Morrison of the Kentucky Center for School Safety for their assistance with the data and research for this project. Any conclusions included herein are solely those of the authors and are not necessarily representative of the views of the Kentucky Center for School Safety.

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