

SUSPENSIONS...NOT THE BEST ANSWER

Suspensions are currently the greatest level of punishments administered in secondary schools across Jamaica. The only punishment or action that supercedes this is that of expulsion. For a student to be considered for suspension, he or she must have committed some act that the school's administration deems to be highly offensive, socially and/or morally degrading. Currently, in most high schools across suspensions are given to students whereby the offenders either stay home for one to ten days or serve 'in-house' suspension whereby they come to school attired differently from other students. But is this really punishing the students for what they have done? Is this helping to mitigate the student's problematic behaviour in anyway?

A fifteen year old student of a high school in Clarendon after getting involved in a serious fight with another student was eventually suspended from school for two days. "Oh well, two days off, t.v me a watch enuh," the student said to a friend after receiving the suspension letter from the school. Whereas, the student could have said this in an effort to convince peers that the suspension had no effect, the possibility lies that the student could have went home for those days and watched television, go to the beach, play video games, hang out at the plazas or even go and chill with the wrong crowd. This is because the school had no programme in place to monitor students when they were out of school on suspension. With the poor parenting standards that pervades Jamaica, the student may not even be monitored at home. The student also ends up missing many classes, and hence his/her education is seriously affected. So, how has this helped the student really? There is no guarantee that the student will not commit the same act again.

The school actually suffers when they suspend students and re-admit them in a couple of days without any proper reform programmes which will ensure that the student improves behavioural standards. Counselling is done in some cases, however in many cases there is no rehabilitation programme for these high offenders of school rules. In fact, it seems that they get away scotch free that the student who may have to serve a detention, which is a less grave punishment. However, we find that students in detention often have to do assignments or have to do some type of community service. One may argue that the suspension gives the students a time to reflect on their actions and 'calm down' especially if they were in anger and range. There may be reflection, but the reality is that in most cases students end up receiving a suspension again if they did not go through proper reform programme or counselling.

A study conducted by Sheryl Hemphil of Deakin University in Australia revealed that the school environment is also affected when students are suspended. Suspensions associated with student and teacher reports of a less effective and inviting school climate. Additionally schools with higher rates of school suspensions have lower average scores on measures of academic achievement

A secondary school in St. Catherine has started to do more 'in house suspensions', where the students have to be attired in a red gown for the females or a red shirt for the males. The concept, a student explained was that they were to be considered 'different' from the rest of the students of the school. This is proposed as a form of punishment as the feeling of embarrassment and isolation would cause

them not to want to commit the act again. It sounds great in theory, but with the unfortunate 'bad man' mentality that many of our students pervade, it is likely that some of these students will be happy to do it, just to show how 'bad' they are.

Studies done by various organizations have confirmed that suspensions are not effective strategies for dealing with student misconducts. In fact, some of the studies alluded to the fact that suspensions actually result in a less student-friendly atmosphere. Costenbader and Markson (1997) examined the responses of 252 students who had been suspended during their school career. Sixty nine percent of those surveyed felt that suspension was of little use, and 32% predicted that they would be suspended again. The survey also found that 55% of students were angry at the persons who had suspended them. Hemphil of Deakin University in Australia confirms high rates of re-offending after the student has been suspended.

The Education Act of 1980 stipulates that after receiving three suspensions, a student should be referred to the Personnel Committee of the Board of Management of the school for the Board of Management, after hearing the case to eventually decide to readmit or expel the student. The act also states that a student should not be expelled from an institution after all measures have been put in place to see an improvement in the behaviour of students. Students receiving three suspensions and just being sent home each time, is not enough to try and improve the behaviour of the students. These students then should not be expelled from schools if the administration has not devised plausible methods to deal with their individual misdemeanours. Giving suspensions is simply not the answer to the maintenance of discipline in the school.

The Ministry of Education at the policy level out to make it mandatory for all schools to have a proper and systematic Rehabilitation and Guidance and Counselling Programme for students who have offended to the extent where they are deserving of suspension. This would include community service, guidance and counselling sessions, as well as disciplinary probation for students who have fallen into suspension. Neil Blomberg of the Villanova University School of Education concluded from his research that felt that a more rehabilitative model of discipline, which offered positive supports for students who cause problems, could be more effective than the traditional form of suspension given to students. The study also posits that this form of punishment keeps students in the classroom environment, it is possible for school officials to both punish inappropriate behaviour, and to intervene in a positive manner with students.

A high school in the corporate area has reported success of their Behaviour Modification Programme. In this programme, the students attends school in black skirt or pants and a white blouse or shirt and have counselling sessions with the guidance counsellors. The programme is particular designed to accommodate students for the different types of offenses that were committed.

In light of these findings, the National Secondary Students' Council therefore urges the Ministry of Education and School Boards to consider implementing policies which focus on Rehabilitation rather than suspension. The dynamics of students conforming to better behaviour has changed and authority

therefore has to bring a change of approach to ensure that the students are both punished and that we help them to conform to a better standard of behaviour.