Request for Proposals to Improve Behavioral Interventions and Reduce Suspensions and Expulsions in Baltimore City Public Schools

There is an astonishing amount of research that highlights the negative academic, social, and health effects of harsh school disciplinary practices, the inequitable and subjective application of school discipline codes, and the cost to schools and students in terms of lost administrative and instructional time. An issue brief developed by Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY) provides a summary of this research and an overview of the negative outcomes caused by school suspensions and expulsions. It is available on ACY's website at www.acy.org and on OSI's website at www.OSI-Baltimore.org.

The Problem

Despite the strong evidence that suspensions are generally ineffective and even harmful, national and local school suspension rates have risen dramatically over the past ten years. Baltimore's annual suspension rate more than doubled, rising from 5.7% in the 1993-94 school year to 12.3% in 2004-05 school year.[1] In the 2004-05 school year, the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) reported 16,641 suspensions issued to 10,899 of its 88,401 students. Nearly 3,800 of those students suspended were in pre-kindergarten through 6th grades, comprising 35% of all suspended or expelled students.

Maryland and Baltimore are not alone in this trend of rising school exclusion. Across the US, schools have adopted the harsh "zero-tolerance" stance that pervades our criminal justice system. Despite research documenting the harm of this approach, many BCPSS schools still employ harmful, ineffective behavior management policies and practices. Examining school and juvenile justice issues in the context of one another, we see strong evidence that the excessive use of suspension and expulsion is linked to high rates of truancy, academic failure, school drop-out, arrests and juvenile detention. Some of the indications and consequences of zero-tolerance disciplinary practices in Baltimore are as follows:

- a substantial number of youth are suspended from Baltimore's public schools for minor offenses, for example, 13% of suspensions in 2004-5 were for poor school attendance and 30% for disrespect or insubordination;
- few schools have dispute resolution alternatives, in-school disciplinary options, teacher training or school culture building programs that can change the disciplinary outcomes of schools;
- Baltimore's school disciplinary policies often lead children directly into the juvenile justice system – in fact, 12% of the cases that come into the juvenile justice system originate with the school police;
- suspended children, as well as those who are involved in the juvenile justice system on home monitoring or evening reporting, rarely receive educational

[1] The suspension rate is the number of suspensions per 100 students. Some students are suspended more than once in a school year.

instruction during the period of time they are excluded from school, and many never return to school;

- while they are out of school, suspended and expelled youth not only fall behind in their studies, but also are at high risk for drug abuse, pregnancy, criminal involvement and victimization, and a host of other negative outcomes;
- agencies are not aware of individual children's educational needs when they are transferred between public systems;
- many excluded students do not return to school as soon as they are permitted and others never return, in part because schools do not have accurate and effective systems to track when and to which school students should return;
- those who do return to the school system from school- or court-based disciplinary actions seldom receive transitional services and are frequently not welcomed by school officials.

While suspension and expulsion levels remain high when compared to those from ten years ago, BCPSS and other Maryland counties have very recently begun a concerted effort to reduce school exclusions, in general, and violent offenses, more specifically. From 2003-04 to 2004-05, total Maryland suspensions and expulsions dropped by nearly 17,000. In part, these efforts are the result of greater understanding of the harmful effects of harsh discipline policies. Additionally, Baltimore City and its sister counties have been forced to lower high rates of long-term suspensions and expulsions for violent offenses by the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. This legislation has resulted in six Baltimore schools being defined as "persistently dangerous"[2] and 11 being placed on the state's "watch list." As a consequence of these negative designations, BCPSS has become very interested in developing programs and policies to reduce these offenses and their disciplinary consequences. Indeed, when 2003-04 and 2004-05 school year data are compared, it is clear that BCPSS officials have already begun to limit the use of suspension as a disciplinary tool. In one year, total suspensions and expulsions in the district have fallen from 26,324 to 16,241. This is the largest drop of any system in the state, and accounts for nearly 60% of the drop state-wide.

Improving School Climate and Reducing Suspensions and Expulsions

Reductions in school suspensions are to be cheered, but it is clear from school and district staff and from parents and students that schools are struggling mightily to find effective disciplinary alternatives to replace the overused suspension tool. BCPSS has provided some training for staff in behavior management strategies and has instituted the Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) program (www.pbis.org) in persistently dangerous middle schools and in elementary schools with high suspension rates. Additionally, some schools have been able to adopt individual programs such as *Student Court* or in-school suspension classrooms. Nonetheless, most schools lack

[2] Schools with long term suspension or expulsion rates for violent offenses that are equal to or greater than 2 ½% of the school's population for three years in a row are classified as "persistently dangerous." Students in these schools are allowed to transfer to other, less dangerous schools. In addition to providing transfer options, school districts with high numbers of designated schools are under great pressure from state and federal officials to improve the schools' climate.

adequate alternatives and have both too many disruptive students and too few effective behavior management tools.

In this context, we believe an RFP to fund additional programs and strategies would be an effective way to build on BCPSS's efforts and to introduce new ideas and programs to schools. Based on our reading of the research on this issue, it is clear that schools will need a series of connected programs and policies to address the continuum of student behavioral needs. Good teachers and engaging curricula are necessary, but not sufficient, parts of a strategy to improve student achievement. Schools must work to create an orderly and supportive climate—particularly where there are high rates of violence, widespread poverty, and many underachieving students. Finally, teachers, parents and administrators must understand that school exclusion practices, in most cases, are harmful and ineffective.

On the most basic prevention level, an effective strategy to reduce expulsion and suspension requires that the school and its staff develop a culture and organization that supports positive student behavior. Staff must adopt appropriate behavior management techniques, develop and teach students the school rules and behavioral expectations, and institute those programs and policies that will address students' needs, including basic physical and mental health requirements. This level of intervention is aimed at, and supports, all children in a school. Examples include initiatives to train teachers in behavior management, help children understand and practice appropriate student behavior, give students a sense of ownership and engagement in school, and provide opportunities to interact positively with adults. There is evidence that an effective, comprehensive set of first tier interventions delivered to all enrolled students can eliminate up to 80% of the misbehavior that is typical in high suspension schools.

A second type of intervention is necessary for those children who need additional help adapting to the school environment and who exhibit more consequential or repeated misbehavior. In-school suspension, "time-out" rooms, and peer mediation are examples of this type of strategy. Evidence from PBIS suggests that this second tier of interventions and supports can address the more serious behavior issues for about 15% of students who are not successful with Tier 1 interventions. Finally, a third type of program must be available for serious misbehavior and for students who need regular help managing their behavior. Intensive mental health counseling, formal social skills training and individual tutoring are programs in this tier. These most intensive services are designed to ameliorate the behavior issues of the remaining 5% of students.[3]

Fortunately, due to the increased awareness of the negative consequences of school exclusionary discipline practices, a growing minority of BCPSS schools have begun to institute school-wide behavior programs. These initiatives – PBIS being a prime example - have as their goal eliciting more positive student behavior and enhancing their school's culture. However, few of these schools, if any, have the continuum of programs required to meet their students' needs.

[3] The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) website (www.pbis.org) provides more information about a triage approach to building a safe and supportive school climate.

With this RFP, we are interested in funding those proposals that will help to round out existing initiatives in a school so that principals and teachers have access to the programs, tools and training necessary to address the full range of student behavioral needs and to improve school climate. For this reason, preference will be given to those schools that have already begun to institute a school-wide behavior management program, particularly PBIS. In addition, because of local foundations' ongoing interest in high school reform, strong proposals from Innovation High Schools and restructured high schools are encouraged.

To this end, OSI-Baltimore, collaborating foundations and individual donors are launching an initiative to raise up to $1.5 million to introduce and expand programs into Baltimore City Public Schools that:

(1) provide alternatives to school suspension and expulsion;
(2) communicate and model positive behavior to help students understand expectations;
(3) increase behavior management skills in school staff with the goal of improving school climate;
(4) reduce the negative impact of school exclusion by helping youth access educational services while they are prohibited from attending school; and,
(5) help ensure that youth can quickly and successfully re-enter school after suspension or expulsion.

The goals of this initiative are to:

1. reduce incidents of student misbehavior and violence;
2. reduce suspension, expulsion and disciplinary office referrals;
3. increase daily attendance;
4. improve school climate and student engagement in school; and
5. identify those programs that have the greatest impact and most cost-effective.

The Open Society Institute, partnering foundations, and other donors, including the United Way, will award grants to non-profit organizations to work in and with partnering BCPSS schools. Grants will be made for a period of up to two years, subject to satisfactory progress in year one. Grants may be awarded in two rounds. Round one will be announced in June with program start-up in fall 2006. The second round will be announced in late summer with program start up in early 2007. Most grants will be awarded in the range of $40,000 to $100,000 per year.

Applicant organizations must currently be working in this field, have demonstrated success, and intend to use grant funds requested under the RFP to expand and/or enhance their programs. They must also commit to:

(1) meeting with other educators, service providers, public agency administrators and advocates to address the gaps in service provision and to reform agency policies;

(2) collecting data on their youth and program outcomes;
(3) disseminating periodic reports on their program methodology, implementation and outcomes; and
(4) making the case for additional funding, particularly public funding, to support the continuation and expansion of effective programs.

Application Process

Proposal Guidelines – please submit 4 copies of the application and appendices, which includes:

I. **Cover Page**

Applicants submitting a grant proposal should submit a cover page on institutional letterhead that includes the following:

- a one-sentence description of the proposed initiative;
- the amount requested;
- the total organizational budget amount;
- the name and website of the organization that would serve as the fiscal sponsor for the grant if awarded; and
- the name, address, e-mail and telephone number of the program's primary contact.

II. **Proposal Narrative** (no longer than 12 pages, double spaced, 12pt font)

A. Need (10 points)
Describe the need or issue to be addressed by the program. Use specific data to support the establishment of the need.

B. Organization Experience and Capacity (20 points)
Describe the organization's current work in this field and its capacity to carry out the proposal.

C. Proposed Program (30 points)
Describe the proposed program. Include program objectives, scope, activities, methodology, numbers of youth to be served and staffing.

E. School Context and Partnership (20 points)
Describe the school in which the program will work, including current efforts to improve student behavior and school culture, and information about complementary programs at the school. Describe the participating schools' commitment, financial and otherwise, to the program. This commitment should be outlined in the required letter of commitment (see appendices below).

F. Program Evaluation and Dissemination (15 points)
Describe plans to assess the program's impact. Indicate how progress towards the proposed program outcomes will be measured, what data will be collected and who will be responsible for data collection and analysis. Also outline plans for dissemination of program findings.

G. Sustainability (5 points)
Outline potential and actual funding sources that will support this project and plans for sustaining the programming beyond this funding opportunity.

III. **Appendices**

Appendices to the proposal should include:

- a budget for the project or program for every year funding is requested;
- a letter from the participating school(s) principal detailing the partnership and support for the program, including tracking participant outcomes;
- a list of current and proposed funders of the project or program;
- a page-long program implementation timeline for the 24 month grant period;
- resumes of the organization's director, project director and other key staff;
- a list of the organization's board members and affiliations
- a copy of the IRS letter stating the organization's tax-exempt status,
- a copy of the organization's overall budget; and
- a copy of the most recent annual report and audit (or financial statement).

Important Dates:

RFP released on April 17, 2006
Orientation session May 3, 2006, 10 to 11:30 a.m. at
OSI-Baltimore, 201 N. Charles Street, Suite 1300
Full proposals are due by May 22, 2006
Final decisions will be made by June 9, 2006

Submission Requirements

Proposals are due by May 22, 2006, by 4:30 p.m.

Four copies of the proposal should be submitted to:

Justin Schaberg
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201 North Charles Street
Suite 1300
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