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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Alternatives to suspension work

As parents in the Chicago Public Schools who have been working to end out-of-school suspensions since 2005, we write in support of your March 12 editorial, "Suspending CPS students is no solution." We're glad that the research confirms what we've known for a long time: Suspension rarely, if ever, solves any problems, and it often makes them worse by putting students on the streets without support. That's why we've been pushing a parent-led campaign to change the patterns of punitive discipline in CPS.

Some progress has been made. In 2007, we persuaded CPS to remove some of the strictest "zero-tolerance" language from its Student Code of Conduct and to encourage the use of alternative methods like restorative justice. Last year, language was added that suspensions should only be used as a "last resort."

Of course, this message has not arrived to most of our schools, as recent data from the U.S. Department of Education demonstrates. Still, we have taken on the challenge of creating successful alternatives to suspensions by creating parent-led "Peace Centers" at several schools. At Wells High School in West Town, for example, in lieu of suspension, students work with "parent peacemakers" to help change the behaviors that put them at risk of suspension. This program has already helped to decrease suspensions and improve school climate.

We have met with schools CEO Jean-Claude Brizard and are working with CPS on the discipline code rewrite. We appreciate the CEO's stated commitment to end unnecessarily punitive discipline, but we hope that he truly demands that all CPS schools follow the lead of Wells.

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