

Scrutiny Office
Morier House
Halket Place
St Helier
JE1 1DD

Attached is my response to your request for opinions on student suspensions. I currently work for Highland's College and the Jersey Youth service although this is personal opinion and is not a formal viewpoint of any of my employers. I hope my response is considered although I would like to emphasize that this is an independent opinion.

Kind regards,

Anna Louise Shipley.

September 2009 – Student Suspensions.

I am glad student suspensions are being questioned and, I hope, that this will lead to some changes in the way that we deal with our unproductive and unco-operative youth in the education system.

Suspension from school or lessons is basically a good idea. Excluding an individual and removing them from a situation which causes disruption to other learners makes obvious sense. On paper it is a logical way to deal with unruly teenagers and a clear warning for others to toe the line. However, although suspension can be effective, in my experience it is not. Suspension is the reactive way adults deal with youths who we simply don't know what to do with. It is a case of 'out of sight, out of mind' in a world where teachers are increasingly asked to be classroom managers. We lack the physicality of the past and are untrained to cope with the complex issues of behaviour and brain brought to us by contemporary lives, cultures and student family backgrounds.

Suspension is a coping method to get through the school day and produce a safe environment for other students. It doesn't, however, help the suspended pupil to progress, move on or tackle the reasons behind poor school performance and behaviour.

It can't and shouldn't be the only method used because it sends out the message that 'even we, the professionals, have given up on you'. To be a teenager on the receiving end of this would be frightening and feeds into a momentum of self disbelief.

I work in higher education and with the youth service. I see students who are highly motivated and are not in need of disciplinary actions. The second role I have gives me contact with youths who have been suspended. What shocks me is the frequency with which this occurs. I am shocked at how

often young people are removed from their studies.

I often listen informally to the young people I work with and various discussions arise. Last week a member of our project asked me my opinion about his current situation. His school record means that it will be very difficult for him to get a place on a vocational course in under a year's time. He will succeed in the long run but will no doubt have to take a longer route.

I had to control my shock when he told me that he had been suspended from the second lesson on the first day of the autumn term. Although I do not know the other side of the story I can't help but feel that this is not the best way to start a new school year for staff or students.

As we discussed his attendance and performance further he told me about his struggles with school and his dyslexia, this being the main reason why he can't focus. If I were placed in a room where the language seemed foreign and jargon-filled I can see how my attention would wane and my behaviour would turn to finding ways to stimulate my brain. People are naturally inquisitive, the young especially, but when under-stimulated is it any wonder behaviour plummets accordingly when school loses its appeal?

The Independent on Sunday (page 12, 20/09/09) recently included an article about 'Prejudiced teachers too quick to brand children "naughty"'. Although it refers to primary school students, many of the themes translate to the secondary system.

'Classroom discipline is a very public activity and children who do not conform will be marked as different', reports Richard Garner.

In the account above I worry that there could be parallels between the article's findings and the process of suspension discussed above.

It says: 'Once a child's reputation has begun to circulate in the staffroom, dining hall, and amongst other parents, it may be very difficult for their behaviour not to be interrupted as a sign of such imputed character traits. Children who have acquired a strong reputation may therefore find it harder to be recognised as good.'

Suspension as a cooling-off period is a good idea. Suspension which becomes habitual and expected by staff and student is not. What happens to the youth when left to their own devices? How can we ensure that they are monitored whilst at home? How much do they miss from the curriculum whilst absent? Which negative influences might they be exposed to during this time? Substance abuse, time spent with older youths and crime are all serious but possible scenarios.

Suspension protects staff and the majority of the student body – which is important and well discussed on Radio 4 this morning. It doesn't protect the suspended and here we fail because they are under our duty of care. We leave the most vulnerable and at risk even though their unruly behavior suggests otherwise.

School is also about learning how to learn and how to grow up to be a part of the adult world. We, however, set the pace and make no allowances for those who are too slow or too fast. Exclusion means that we send a dangerous message to our young people. It reinforces the idea that they can play up as much as they like and eventually they will get what they want – freedom from responsibility. This is about as far away from reality as we can possibly get.

Ultimately, the current western education system, as wonderful and inclusive as we adults believe it to be, is not so. One system can't possibly suit 100% of the population because we have different tastes, needs, abilities and interests. Many of those who misbehave in school have complex domestic lives, an abundance of teen hormones, and/or specific learning requirements. These are often reflected in persistent poor attendance and performance records.

Suspended students often see their removal as a blessing. We remove them as a problem and they are removed from their discomfort. A further problem arises when this behaviour is repeated because they spend more and more time left to their own devices. If problem students turn up at all they have done so for a reason. This is something to be taken advantage of and used to positive ends.

I doubt that the whole of western education will change immediately but I hope that we can move towards a system which provides and offers equality whilst acknowledging that we are all simply different. Some will thrive in the classroom; others will not. I think that it is important to offer students who struggle suitable alternatives and not allow them to feel like failures because they are less academic.

Further one-to-one support is needed for problematic students.

So, too, are in-school suspensions – school service for example where students are required to undertake alternative activities which benefit the school but are also informally educational, physical and therapeutic. Examples are gardening, mending and maintenance – but not removed from supervision. More alternative educational initiatives such as DOE and XL (Princes Trust) and practical qualifications which can be obtained in the school but outside of mainstream lessons, guided work experience and community care are also options.

It is better that whilst we have these young people in our care that we do not prejudice them against learning in the future. It is important that they learn something, be it practical skills or academic knowledge.

Many students who are suspended are intelligent. I worry more about those who sit still and never question why we ask them to do a page full of writing or quadratic equations. As adults and teachers we should encourage students to nurture the skills that they do have rather than berate them for lacking others. Students who whinge and moan might just be excellent problem-finders and solvers.

I wonder how many students are suspended just once in their school career compared with those who are repeatedly suspended. If the later is a higher figure then we need to consider what the procedure is for. Is it a tool to make an adult's life easier? Is it to ensure learning for the class through removing the disruptive? Or is it to enrich the life of the young person in question? If it is none of the above then we need to reconsider what a school is actually for in the year 2010.