

CMS Suspension Diversion Program

Rationale

Five years ago, Carmel Middle School began examining suspension diversion and restorative justice models in an effort to create a safe educational and social emotional environment for all students. The need for improvement came from an examination of existing data. From 2012–2014, Carmel Middle School reported student suspension rates 3.8% higher than the state average. As a well resourced school simultaneously reporting CST scores among the highest in the state, our administrative team determined that something within our discipline model and school culture had to change.

In many schools, the answer to an elevated suspension rate is simply to suspend fewer students. While this practice successfully changes reported data, it has little impact on the real behaviors students engage in and experience while at school. Realizing that traditional suspensions remove students from the learning environment creating loss of academic progress and isolation from peers without the opportunity for social-emotional learning or restorative measures, the administrative team at Carmel Middle School engaged in efforts to diversify our traditional school discipline model. Identifying the necessity for authentic change, the administrative team at Carmel Middle School began studying a variety of disciplinary models and social-emotional programs aligned with improved student behavior and the establishment of a positive school culture. Our goal was to build a program that addressed student behavior in an authentic manner, allowing students the opportunity to reflect upon and grow from behavior incidents that were undesirable. We believed that if we could build a program based on these ideals we would see a decrease in suspensions with a simultaneous increase in a positive school climate.

Examining Data to Build the Program

The first step in this process was to change our method of providing consequences for undesired behavior. To that end, we carefully examined and considered several year's worth of discipline data, determining what offenses were most common at CMS. The results indicated that the majority of behaviors resulting in short term suspensions concentrated on a core group of behaviors, primarily, bullying and harassment, inappropriate physical contact (minor physical altercations), and acts of defiance within the classroom or on school property. Next, we examined offenses that had been assigned 3 days of suspension. Within this group we found a similar pattern of behavior with bullying and harassment, inappropriate physical contact (fighting), and inappropriate behavior (sexual harassment) making up the majority of these suspensions. Finally, we looked at 4-5 days suspensions and found that most of these were the results of drug/alcohol use, and severe/pervasive harassment or bullying, and cases of severe sexual harassment. In most cases, these offenses were tied to previous infractions and many students assigned 4-5 days of suspension for a behavior infraction had already received one or more smaller suspensions during the school year. We also found that long term suspensions of 4-5 days were minimal in comparison to the 1-3 day variety for the infractions described above.

After accumulating this data and examining both our long term trends and responses, we determined that student behavior resulting in suspensions from school could almost always be dealt with using a diversion program that would include an educational component and an opportunity for engagement in some type of restorative justice. We also noted several cases of recidivism within the data and hypothesized that combining an educational program with a restorative justice component might reduce repeat offenses and therefore reduce the number of incidents resulting in 4-5 day suspensions from school. We hoped that by providing a different path of consequence including education and restorative practices both our short and long term suspensions would simultaneously decline.

The Program

After researching several programs and finding none that really fit our needs we determined that an individualized approach to disciplinary incidents would best serve our students. Based on the repeated disciplinary incidents noted in our data we developed a series of lessons to address the most common behaviors at CMS that resulted in student suspension. Prior to the 2014-15 school year we began the creation of a media library featuring educational videos that address topics related to the most common behavior infractions for which students at CMS were suspended. For each video we created a packet of work featuring key terms, news articles about related student/juvenile behavior, hypothetical student scenarios, a victim impact worksheet, and a letter of apology. Moving into the 2014-15 school year we determined that in applicable cases we would substitute student suspensions with a diversion program that included watching the videos and engaging in educational program related to social-emotional learning and restorative justice practices. Feedback from students and parents was immediately positive and our parent population soon pointed out that allowing parents the opportunity to review the information provided to students in our program would benefit discussions at home. Following this feedback, we began sending completed packets home with the student for a review session with parents while requiring a parent signature on the packet to ensure that a review of the work had taken place in the home.

At CMS we now have a collection of over a dozen different videos addressing teen and tween behaviors and offering advice for positive change. Many of these were purchased from Human Relations Media as we found that this company offers an extensive collection of age appropriate films addressing a number of common behaviors exhibited by middle school students. For example, a student who might have faced a 1-2 day suspension for engaging in threatening behavior and minor physical aggression toward another student will now spend a partial day in our in-school detention program while watching a series of videos that include titles such as "Confessions of a Bully", "Pushed to the Brink: Bullycide on the Rise", and "Bully Bystanders: You Can Make a Difference". A student disciplined for using a racial slur will now read a selection from a book called "Us and Them: A History of Intolerance in America" and watch a video called "The Shadow of Hate". A student accused of sexual harassment due to inappropriate comments or jokes might be assigned the video "Flirting or Hurting: When is it Okay, When is it Harassment". In each of these cases, a student engaging in the same behaviors prior to 2014-15 would have been suspended from school for 1-2 days. Now, students who engage in the undesired behaviors described above spend a day or less engaging in our diversion program while benefiting from the social emotional learning and restorative practices embedded within the program.

We have found similar success with disciplinary cases requiring a stronger response and greater consequences. For example, a student caught smoking on campus prior to 2014-15 would have likely faced a 3 day suspension from school. Now, a student caught with an electronic vaporizing device on campus will be assigned a one day suspension from school but will return to school to watch “What’s Up With E-Cigarettes” while participating in our diversion program providing the opportunity to engage in education around the undesired behavior. We have found that by providing a disciplinary program that directly addresses the undesired behavior we can successfully reduce suspensions while simultaneously educating students about the negative impacts their behavior might have on their future, on other students, and on the school community. This tends to result in greater success in changing negative behaviors and has led to a noticeable decline in student suspensions and recidivism.

The chart below compares our approach to student discipline before and after the 2014-15 school year.

CMS Suspension Diversion Program Comparison

CMS Student Discipline Plan Prior to 2014-15	CMS Suspension Diversion Program 2014-15 - Present
Student engages in behavior resulting in suspension.	Student engages in behavior resulting in suspension.
Student is suspended from school for 1-3 days.	Student is assigned Suspension Diversion Program in lieu of suspension and is assigned to a partial day of in-school detention supervised by school employee. Parent conference is held.
Parent is notified, conference held, suspension enforced, student remains at home for duration of suspension.	Student watches assigned video and completes work packet related to offense. Work packet emphasizes elements of social emotional learning and restorative justice practices.
Student returns to school, meets with administration before first class and resumes regular school activities.	Student meets with school administrator or counselor to review and discuss completed work. Restorative practices are used when applicable; letter of apology, meeting with offended student, etc. Student may return to class upon successful completion of the program (usually one day or less).
	Work packet is sent home with student for review with parent. Signature required and packet returned to administrator prior to start of school the next day.
	Final review of incident and learning discussed with administrator. Student is given a plan for dealing with questions or comments from other students and is encouraged to put the incident behind them and start over with a positive mindset.

Results of the Program

Results using this program have been remarkable. In the four school years since implementation in 2014-15 our suspension rates have dropped below state averages in 3 of 4 years, culminating in our lowest suspension rate of 1.8% in 2017-18. The graph below details these improvements and the highlighted year (2014-15) represents the first year of implementation of our new philosophy and program.

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
CMS	6.1%	8.9%	7.8%	2.6%	2.2%	3.8%	1.8%
California	5.7%	5.1%	4.4%	3.8%	3.7%	3.6%	3.5%

In addition, recidivism has dramatically declined at CMS and students who are assigned discipline through our program rarely repeat the undesired behaviors. Furthermore, long term suspensions have also significantly declined at CMS following implementation of our diversion program. As an additional noted benefit, results on our internal school climate survey, providing data on student impressions regarding safe schools, positive connections to school, and feelings of happiness at school have all increased since the implementation of this program.

We believe that through our improved approach, students are better able to process and reflect on their behavior in an environment that provides social emotion support and an opportunity for restorative practices. By providing students with the opportunity to view behavior setbacks as opportunities for personal growth and positive change we believe that students are more likely to reflect upon and make changes to undesired behaviors. We also believe we have created a much more effective disciplinary system that promotes a healthy, positive school climate and culture, with social emotional support and restorative practices available to all students. While our program continues to grow and adapt to new challenges we are extremely proud of our results and the impact this approach has had on our campus.

Conclusion

Faced with the task of reducing suspension rates at CMS in the 2014-15 school year, CMS administration sought to develop a program that would authentically impact student behavior in a positive manner. The result was the implementation of a suspension diversion program that was prescriptive and based on student need. Key components of social-emotional learning and restorative justice practices were implemented and our program was put in place in an effort to reduce the negative impacts of student suspension. The results were better than expected as CMS experienced a decline in suspension rate in the first year of implementation moving from a suspension rate of 7.8% in 2013-14 to a rate of 2.6% in 2014-15 a reduction of 5.2% in one school year! The success of our program is highlighted by our all time low 1.8% suspension rate in 2017-18 and we anticipate further success as we continue to grow and improve our suspension diversion program. Through the use of this program we were able to meet a number of our district's LCAP goals in the area of Student Support and Engagement with the primary

focus and results contributing to improvements in programs and services that address the social-emotional behavioral needs of students.

For further information about this program, implementation, or ideas related to our approach to student discipline feel free to contact Carmel Middle School Principal, Dan Morgan, at 831.624.2785 or via email at dmorgan@carmelunified.org.