

The VISA Center

A Report on a Program for Students Suspended from the Buffalo Public Schools for Violent and/or Aggressive Behavior, Substance Abuse, or Weapons Possession¹

Summary of the Full Report² 9/16/06)

Principle Investigator: Dr. Lawrence Shulman, Professor, U.B. School of Social Work

Co-Investigator and Data Analyst: Dr. Eugene Maguin, Research Associate Professor, U.B. S.S.W.

Research Associates: Charles Syms, Clinical Assistant Professor, U.B.S.S.W.
Dr. Mark Cameron, Department of Social Work, Southern Connecticut State University

Research Assistants: Sandra Sheppard and Amy Manning

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¹ The VISA acronym stands for Vision, Integrity, Service and Accountability.

² This is a summary of the full 175 page report. The full report contains detailed methodological descriptions, 72 tables of results, statistical analysis procedural information, sample selection issues, etc. This summary report is available as PDF attachment at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu (see research reports).

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I would like to acknowledge the contributions of the many people who helped to make this project possible. First and foremost is the former Deputy Speaker of the New York Assembly, the Honorable Arthur O. Eve. After visiting a suspension program in Boston, Assemblyman Eve returned determined to have a similar resource for children in Buffalo. At that time, I was the new Dean of the UB School of Social Work (SSW) and was approached by the Assemblyman to establish such a Center. He was able to obtain State Legislature funding of \$700,000 for the project and VISA (Vision, Integrity, Service and Accountability) was born.

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Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the VISA students themselves who, for the most part, for two weeks, broke the patterns of behavior that had led to their suspensions. They demonstrated a form of resilience in the face of numerous risk factors that allowed them to open up and to be vulnerable to staff and other students. For some, the challenge was too much for this stage in their lives. Their return to schools that were not always welcoming as well as to the same neighborhood, family and social problems led to continued negative behavior. If nothing else, for a brief two weeks of their school lives, they had a chance to work closely with a staff that had time for them, and also a staff that cared and believed in them. I maintain many of these children may have taken that experience with them and at some point in their lives, when they are ready, it can be a source of strength for change.

INTRODUCTION

Project Setting and Overview

The setting for this study was the Buffalo, New York public schools. This rust belt urban school district reported serving 43,858 students during the 2000-2001 school year and 42,941 students during the 2001-2002 school year, the two years of the study. The loss of approximately 1,000 students between years may reflect the rapidly declining industrial base of this community and surrounding areas, which has precipitated a general decrease in the overall population.

Additionally, the loss of students reflects a growing charter school movement, and a willingness to pay for private education in the many parochial and independent schools in the area. For some parents, these were seen as ways of avoiding the myriad of problems associated with the local public school system.

The VISA (Vision, Integrity, Service and Accountability) Center was designed to offer suspended Buffalo public school children in grades 6-11 an opportunity to explore alternatives to violence-related behaviors within a structured, supportive environment. Assignment to the VISA Center was offered as an alternative to the regular program of academic support prescribed for students formally suspended from school. This regular program consisted of one to two hours of daily home instruction provided by a teacher during after-school hours. Although a State requirement, home instruction was not always provided immediately upon suspension and sometimes not at all before the students returned to their schools.

The VISA Center was located in a small, free-standing annex building on the University at Buffalo South Campus on Main Street in Buffalo, New York. Project staff worked out of a suite of three adjoining rooms, which also housed program administrative space. Another room contained four computers for student use. Four classrooms were also used for the educational component of the program. Students were expected to take a bus or train to the South Campus and were then picked up at the station by a university transportation bus, under the supervision of the program security guard and a teacher's aid. This was a condition set by University security staff because of a concern that the students would be wandering on campus and that campus police would not be able to distinguish between program participants and unwanted visitors from the surrounding community. Students were transported back to the train station at the conclusion of the program day. The Buffalo school district provided breakfast and lunch, which was served to participants at the Center. The program day ran from 9:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

The project was funded for the first year by a \$700,000 New York State Legislative Initiative Grant. Funding was obtained by the then Buffalo Assemblyman and Deputy Speaker of the NY State Assembly, the Honorable Arthur O. Eve. The research portion of the project was originally designed to run for three academic years starting in the fall semester of 2000 and ending at the completion of the 2002-2003 school year. The first year was to be used for program and evaluation instrument development and testing. The second and third years were to be used for a full implementation of the revised program. Outcome data was to be collected for the VISA students and then compared with data on the students in our sample who received the normal alternative support.

Events at the start of the program and in the fall of 2001 prevented the full implementation of the project. In September of 2000, a city-wide teacher's strike delayed the start of the program until the middle of November. This disrupted intake and allowed for only a small number of students to be referred before the start of the holiday break. The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 resulted in a dramatic shift in funding priorities for the State legislature and led to the program closing down later that fall. Instead of three full years of operation, the project had a delayed fall semester, a full spring semester and a partial fall semester. A three-year project became a one year project over two school years.

Recognizing this reality, the project staff expanded the focus of the data analysis beyond just a direct comparison of the outcomes for the VISA (experimental) group and the non-VISA suspended students (the control group). Instead, it was decided to use the project data to develop and test our program and instruments, and to deepen our understanding of the factors contributing to a child's behavior in the school, as well as those factors that might help students in trouble survive and even thrive in their school settings. We were also interested in school-specific data that might serve as a predictor of re-suspension as well as a moderating variable affecting the impact of the program on outcomes. Variables such as a school's annual suspension rate (the number of students suspended divided by the total population), the types of offenses that lead to suspension (violent versus non-violent), or the school's size might impact the study's outcome measures. A full test of the VISA program's impact on students would have to wait for another study. Data analysis and findings included in this report might help in the design of a future project.

Program Staffing and Training

A professional MSW social worker with extensive experience working in the Buffalo School District's special programs for students with behavioral difficulties served as Center Director. She supervised the work of four teachers, each certified in one of the major areas of academics (English, history, math, and science). She also supervised a full-time MSW social worker, two MSW interns, a behavioral counseling specialist, a security guard, and the program receptionist. Oversight of the project and the research was provided by two UB School of Social Work faculty members. A principal from the Buffalo Alternative School was assigned official district supervision responsibility for those staff members employed under sub-contract with the Buffalo Public Schools' Board of Education.

Staff had initial training in the implementation of a series of modules (described in more detail later in the report), as well as in group methods for working with students. Individual teachers were selected from among volunteers for their expertise in their subject areas. Meetings were held regularly with all staff to review the progress of the programs and to discuss issues as they emerged. For example, when should a student be suspended from the VISA program for inappropriate behavior? Individual consultation and supervision was provided by the Center director, and when appropriate, the two UB faculty members. Social work student supervision was provided by MSW Center staff members.

Population Served

School District records indicate that 3,089 (7% of the total) students were suspended during the 2000-2001 school year; and 4,409 (10.3%) during the 2001-2002 school year. From the fall of 2000 to the spring of 2002 the school district experienced a rise of 4.3% in the number of students suspended and a 50% increase in the proportion of total students suspended.

All of these students encountered disciplinary trouble resulting in a formal suspension process initiated by their principal and carried out by the district superintendent. Causes of suspension included fighting, physically or verbally attacking teachers or staff, insubordination, and drug or weapon possession. The formal suspension process calls for mandated procedures, including the documentation of charges against the student; the principal's request for suspension; notification of the guardian/parent; a hearing attended by the student, the student's parent or guardian, a parent advocate or attorney, a school-appointed hearing officer, and witnesses to the incidents in question (in the event of denial of the charges); and provision of home instruction during a legally sanctioned number of days out of school.

The VISA program was designed to serve 6th to 11th grade students, which, although the District does not break out suspension numbers by grade or age, constitute a very large percentage of students suspended. Even so, VISA was able to serve a small fraction of potentially eligible suspended students. When space was available in the program, the parent advocate or a School Board staff member provided information about the VISA program to the guardian/parent and student when the student and their parent or guardian arrived for the hearing. With student and guardian/parent consent in writing, students were enrolled in the program. Students normally began the VISA program within two school days following the formal suspension. Intake interviews for the program were conducted by the project social worker on three days each week. Students and their parents/guardians were required to be present at the intake interview. During these interviews, information about students, their problems, and their family situations was gathered. In some cases, referrals to community social service and health agencies were made. Students and their parents were given an in-depth orientation to the program.

Program Components

The VISA Center programming was designed to both help students develop skills for avoiding future behavioral problems in school as well as to support their learning during their exclusion from school. The program was structured to accommodate the usual 10 school-day formal suspension period. Because of the rolling admission structure, both the psycho-social intervention and the educational programs were modulized and designed to be responsive to the ongoing change in program membership resulting from the introduction of new students to the group.

Behavioral Program

A program addressing behavioral issues was designed to offer two discrete intervention approaches. A social skills training approach formed the foundation of the intervention structure. During each of the ten days in the program, students were presented with a unit taken from the

model focusing on key skills related to behavior, decision making, and relating to others. These units included didactic presentation of material on productive ways of handling anger and anxiety; self-image; managing conflicts with peers; assertiveness; communication skills; decision-making skills; alcohol, tobacco, and drug use; thinking about violence; and other social skills areas. Staff would present material, engage students in conversations about the topics, and invite conversation among the group members regarding their experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to the topics. Approximately 10 students at a time attended these sessions, which lasted for 60 minutes.

The second component of this element of the program was a mutual aid group experience, based upon the Principal Investigator's group work approach (Shulman, 2006; Gitterman and Shulman, 2005). These groups were designed to promote discussion, peer support, learning, and behavior modification among students who described their problems and difficulties in school and their relationships with adults and peers at school, at home, and in their communities. For example, students would describe conflict situations with either teachers or other students and their inability to avoid physical fights without losing face. For most of the students, these discussions also revealed the extent of community violence (for example, drive by shootings) as well as family violence they had witnessed and how these incidents affected their interactions at school. These sessions were attended by approximately 10 students at a time and were led by the program social worker. The sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Additionally, individual counseling and conflict mediation was offered students who requested it, or for those students who were judged by staff to be in need of additional attention. These sessions were arranged as needed and were held before or after the program day, during lunch period, or during other free time during the program day.

Academic Program

The academic program consisted of four class periods covering the four required academic areas (English, math, history and science) of 30 minutes each. A maximum of ten students were in each class. The class sessions were structured to allow both group and individual learning. The first ten minutes of each class consisted of a brief conceptual presentation by the teacher, typically focusing on basic academic skills related to the subject area. These presentations were designed to benefit all students given the range in age and academic ability. The rest of the class period was devoted to tutoring students who worked on individualized assignments some of which were sent to the program by their regular school teachers. These assignments approximated the material students would be missing during their exclusion from school, in an effort to prevent students from falling behind in their academic work. Project teachers provided individual attention to students during this period and also provided additional exercises and assignments. Students could utilize a Center computer lab during academic periods to work on their assignments and do additional research. On Friday afternoons students were treated to a party, a movie, or games to reward them for successfully work in the program.

Program staff maintained contact with students' parents/guardians during their participation in the program to inform them of the nature of the student's participation, problems, and progress.

After-School Program

In addition to the foundation program, an academic and behavioral after-school program was developed by staff in response to students who were returning to the Center after the regular school day or indicating a desire to stay behind. For some students this was a result of their attachment to Center staff. Others indicated the Center was a sanctuary for them since returning to their neighborhoods exposed them to potentially dangerous street and gang activity. This program, which started on an informal basis, was formalized during the first year of the project.

Summer Program

A program designed to promote career planning, job-seeking and job skills was conducted during the summer of 2001. A group of 16 selected participants engaged in discussions with staff and peers about career and educational aspirations, learned basic job skills, practiced interviewing and public speaking, learned computer skills, and participated in several field trips to local businesses to learn about career opportunities. At the end of the summer, the students solicited donations from several organizations and put on a banquet and presentation for local business people, teachers, and their own parents. Each student presented their long term project at this banquet and received awards for their participation. Participants were paid for their involvement in this program at a rate of \$6/hour.

Program Safety and Security, Code of Conduct, and Disciplinary Procedures

Students entering the building passed through a metal detector staffed by the program's security guard. A hand held metal detector wand was used on bags, and individual property searches were conducted by male and female staff. The students left all personal backpacks and jackets in a locked room for the remainder of the school day.

This was a controversial feature of the program as it raised concerns among some members of the Buffalo School Board about stigmatization of the students. In this same time period, School Board members were dealing with the issue of introducing similar safety measures at a number of the schools in the district. Some Board members who opposed such steps were concerned about setting a precedent. Given that a number of participants had been suspended for carrying weapons, the PI decided that this was a non-negotiable condition for conducting the program. After a presentation, the School Board members unanimously agreed to the security measures provided that project staff survey both students and parents on their reactions to the security measures. In almost all of the cases, both parents and students approved of the security system during intake and during the follow-up interviews, since it eased their own concerns about possible weapons related violence. As one student stated, "Knowing no one else was bringing a weapon meant I didn't need to bring one for protection."

Problem behavior in their schools and in the VISA program was seen as an important signal of issues that needed to be addressed by staff. The philosophy of the program was that such behavior always represented a maladaptive form of communication. At times, students were

seen as acting out the very behavior that led their suspensions from their regular school. Staff would attempt to respond by first setting limits and then exploring the message behind the behavior. It was not unusual to find that the specific behavior was connected to traumatic experiences at home or in the community. At times, the students' behavior was discussed in the mutual aid support groups with other students engaged in the effort. An attempt was made to help the student find a more adaptive way of handling issues and feelings that were influencing behavior.

If a student acting problematically was judged to be unresponsive to staff intervention or the level or nature of the behavior was seen as sufficiently serious, dangerous or disruptive, or was seen as preventing their learning in the program (for example, truancy, skipping, non-participation, insubordination) they were suspended from the program. Their parent/guardian was required to come in prior to the student being re-admitted. Both the student and parent/guardian then signed a behavioral agreement for their continued participation in the program.

Modifications to Program over Time: The Three Phases of the Project

The program was adapted over time, based upon staff and student evaluation of the experience. This was part of the planned first year program development stage when it was still believed that the program would be continued for at least two additional years. Given the late start due to the teacher's strike and the early ending resulting from 9/11 related budget cuts, the program can be considered as comprised of three somewhat distinct phases. The initial phase, beginning with the first intakes mid-November 2000 to late January 2001, may be called the trial phase. The district-wide teachers' strike that delayed the official opening of school that fall most likely contributed to instability in the various schools the students attended and may have also contributed, for some students, to the disruptive behavior leading to the suspensions.

During this phase, project front-line staff attempted to develop and implement a new way to respond to problematic behavior that differed from what VISA students had experienced at their schools. Whereas the school usually provided a great deal of structure and limit setting, the staff emphasized personal responsibility and provided less structure and accountability. This led to behavior problems similar to those experienced in the regular school setting, and staff soon realized that more structure and accountability was needed.

The second phase, running from late January 2001 to June 2001, featured increased structure and greater uniformity of limit setting by staff. In this phase the staff more clearly understood that one could provide structure, hold students accountable and still address the underlying needs signaled by the behavior. Through supervision and consultation provided by the overall University-based faculty, staff more clearly understood that structure and accountability, if it was of the right kind, created freedom. They also began to more clearly understand another often posed false dichotomy between support and confrontation. They needed to be supportive when confronting and to recognize that confrontation and accountability was a form of support.

Finally, the third and final phase of the program, running from September through November 2001, differed from the earlier phases in that the experiences and lessons learned from

the first year led to a more coherent and consistent program from the start of the school semester. Unfortunately, the attack on the World Trade Center of September 11th led to a significant shifting of State funding to meet the needs of New York City. The \$700,000 annual funding for this program was not renewed and the project had to be ended with great regret by project staff, the Buffalo School Board administrators and Board members, teachers and school principals.

METHODS

Study Design, Sample, and Data Sources

For a number of reasons it was not possible to randomly assign students to either the VISA group or a ‘treatment-as-usual’ control group. Thus the study utilized a non-equivalent comparison group design. In this study design, students who were either not offered placement in VISA (due to a lack of openings at that time) or elected not to take part (including students whose parents rejected the offer of VISA placement) were compared to students who were placed in the VISA program.

A total of 280 6th to 11th grade students, 233 in the 2000-01 school year and 47 in the 2001-02 school year, accepted an offer of placement in the VISA program. The comparison sample was to consist of those 6th to 11th grade students who were suspended in either 2000-01 or 2001-02 (or both) and who did not participate in VISA.

The District provided to the Principal Investigator selected data from the Student Information System (SIS), with one exception, noted below, for all 6th to 11th grade students suspended during program years. However, because the District was unable to directly link student disciplinary records with other student information (e.g., enrollment, or marks), an ad-hoc method had to be used. As a result, the data provided an incomplete set of all eligible suspended students.

The Buffalo school district provided three datasets:

- Student enrollment and demographics
- Academic courses taken and grades
- Disciplinary infractions and suspensions

The student enrollment information consisted of student demographics (date of birth, gender, ethnicity, and lunch program eligibility) and for each school attended, the entering and leaving dates, reason codes, and school and district identification numbers. The second dataset contained the courses taken and marks earned. Both of these datasets in both years were abstracted from the SIS.

The third dataset contained disciplinary infraction and suspension information. In the 2000-2001 school year, these data were provided by the office responsible for managing student suspensions. The data consisted of the suspension reason and hearing date for students whose suspensions were upheld and were formally suspended. In the 2001-2002 school year due to a change in the School District’s information systems, disciplinary infraction data was taken from the Student Information System (SIS). The 2001-2002 disciplinary infraction file contained

entries for all disciplinary events, including date of infraction, type of event, hearing date and action taken.

The data sets used in the evaluation were constructed by linking suspension data, enrollment history, academic performance (courses and marks) data, and VISA program enrollment data via a common identification number.³ In the course of this work, it was discovered that student enrollment and demographics and academic marks were missing for many known-to-be-suspended students. As a result, the 2000-1 dataset consisted of 143 students enrolled in VISA and 592 comparison students, and the 2001-2 dataset consisted of 36 students enrolled in VISA and 115 comparison students. Thus, the combined dataset consisted of 886 students: 179 VISA program students and 707 comparison students.

At the conclusion of each student's participation in the VISA program during the 2000-2001 school year, students were asked to complete an exit survey as a means of describing and evaluating their experiences in the VISA program. Of the 233 students eligible to complete an exit survey, 192 students actually did so. The 192 exit surveys were then matched to the main analysis dataset so that student demographic, academic performance and suspension data could be linked to exit survey responses. Because of the previously described incompleteness of district-provided data, an additional 72 exit surveys were unusable. In summary, of the 233 potential exit surveys, 119 were completed and were able to be matched to student demographics, academic performance, and suspension data.

Another data set was used to identify school-related factors for the school attended by the student when first suspended and then again if re-suspended. Data were abstracted from the school annual "report cards" prepared for each school in the district. The data abstracted were the school's total enrollment, the school's enrollment in grades 6 to 11, the grade range of the school (e.g., 6-8), and the school's suspension rate.

Study Measures and Plan of Analysis

Our selection of measures for this evaluation was guided our review of the literature on suspension, re-suspension and intervention programs (See Appendix A) and constrained by the data available from the District databases. From these sources we constructed five related dependent variables to measure the outcomes of participating (or not) in VISA. An example of a dependent (resultant) variable would be whether or not a student was re-suspended. We also assembled a set of independent variables that described characteristics of the students or their schools. An example of an independent (determinant) variable would be participation in VISA or student age.

³ To be included in the dataset, students had to have been formally suspended and appear in the enrollment history dataset. The enrollment history was carefully reviewed to verify that the student remained enrolled in a Buffalo public school and in regular or special education classes between the target (first) suspension during the study period and the next suspension—if there was one—or the end of their enrollment in a Buffalo public school or the end of the school year. Students who did not remain enrolled were removed from the dataset.

Independent or predictor variables

These are the variables that based upon our observations and the literature may exert influence, independently or in some combination, on the dependent or outcome variables of the study. While it was not expected that any one variable on its own would be the sole explanation for outcomes, they might help to explain some portion of the variance (variation) in the outcomes. For example, while gender may not be a sole predictor of re-suspension, statistical analysis might tell us if it had a significant impact on the outcome and how much of the outcome did it predict.

These variables allow for manipulation at several levels of interest and multiple combinations, which improve the clarity of explaining the impact on relevant dependent variables, unique interaction effects (how variables affect each other in influencing outcomes), and subsequent generalizability to the entire population. These variables included the following: VISA participation, target (first) suspension type, target quarter marks, age; ethnicity, target grade, lunch code, program phase, target suspension month, years behind grade and school-related variables such as number of students and the school's suspension rate.

VISA: Participation in VISA program compared with participation in the control group.

Three specific questions were selected from the exit survey for use in these analyses because the responses provided insight into what students had learned, if they used what they had learned, and how they rated the overall experience of participating in VISA.

Skills learned: Students' responses to the open-ended question, "What was the most useful thing you learned?" were read and coded into one of 13 homogenous categories. For use in these analyses, a variable was created by grouping the 13 response categories into three, larger categories. The categories of skills learned were 1) learned no skills, 2) learned academic skills, and 3) learned social skills.

Skill used: Students' responses to the second open-ended question, "Have you actually used the skills you learned in real-life situations? If yes, describe one," were read and coded into one of eight categories that emerged from themes suggested by the responses. For use in these analyses, a variable was created by grouping the eight response categories into two, larger response categories. The categories of skills used were 1) no skills used, 2) used a skill.

Helped by program: Students rated how participating in the VISA program helped them learn to get along better with friends, parents or other adults on a three point scale (1 = Helped a lot, 2 = Helped a little, 3 = No help). However, because very few students used the 'no help' response, the 'helped a little' and 'no help' responses were combined.

Target suspension type: Designated the target suspension as violent or nonviolent. Violent suspensions were defined as those involving physical contact or threats of such between the student and school staff or another student, or possession of a gun or knife. For students participating in the VISA program, the target suspension was the suspension that immediately preceded the student's enrollment in the VISA program. For students in the comparison group, the target suspension was their first suspension of the academic year.

Target suspension quarter marks: The student's overall grade point average in the quarter of the target suspension. This number was then coded into one of four categories: less than 60, 60-70, 70-80, or 80 or more.

Age: The student's age is computed from the recorded date of birth in the school records and the reference date is January 1 of the year in which the school year ends. This computation reflects District policy that requires children have their sixth birthday by January 1 of the year following first grade entry.

Ethnicity: The student's ethnic identification. Students were categorized by the student's parent(s) as: White, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; African-American (Black); Native American; or Asian-Pacific Islander. For analyses, the categories Native American and Asian-Pacific Islander were combined with White because their percentages in the dataset were less than 2% for Native American and less than 1% for Asian-Pacific Islander; and because their re-suspension rate was more similar to that of whites than any other ethnic group.

Target grade: The student's grade level enrollment at the time of the target suspension.

Lunch program eligibility: The student's eligibility for free, free/direct certified lunch or reduced fee school lunches, which is an indicator of the family's economic status.

Program phase: The phase of the VISA program during which the student was participating. As described in the Program section, the VISA program curriculum and operation was revised at approximately the beginning of the second semester of the 2000-2001 school year and again at the beginning of the first semester of the 2001-2002 school year. Thus, program phase one corresponds approximately to the period between program startup and the beginning of the second semester of the first year; phase two corresponds approximately to the second semester of the first year; and phase three corresponds to the period of time between the resumption of program operations in the first semester of the 2001-2002 school year and the end of operations on or about October 26, 2001.

Target suspension month: The month in which the target suspension occurred. For students in the VISA program, the target suspension was the suspension that immediately preceded the student's enrollment in the VISA program. For students in the comparison group, the target suspension was simply the student's first suspension of the school year.

Years behind grade level: This variable records whether the student was one or more years behind given the child's age.⁴

School-related variables: The size of the school (number of total students) and the suspension rate (number of suspensions divided by the total number of students) and the adjusted suspension rate. This data was obtained from the "school report card" issued by the district in each of the two school years of the study.

⁴ This computation does not account students, more likely boys, who were held back from enrolling in kindergarten or first grade in order to increase their emotional and/or social maturity before starting school.

Dependent or outcome variables

Five variables were used as outcome or dependent variables. These were re-suspension, time to re-suspension, next suspension type, number of new suspensions and next quarter marks.

Re-suspension: This variable recorded whether or not a student was formally suspended during the follow-up interval. The follow-up interval was defined as the time period between the target or first suspension and the end of the school year or until the student left the Buffalo public school system or ceased to be enrolled in regular or special education classes at the Buffalo public schools.

Time to re-suspension: This variable was used for survival analyses (how long did the student survive without being re-suspended). It measured the length of time in days between the target or first suspension and the second suspension, if one occurred; or the end of the school year or until the student left the Buffalo public school system, if a second suspension did not occur.

Next suspension type: This variable recorded the type of the second suspension infraction as either violent or nonviolent.

Number of new suspensions: This variable measured the number of new suspensions during the remainder of the school year following the first or target suspension.

Next quarter marks: The student's overall grade point average in the academic quarter following the target suspension. (This variable was not recorded because categories made the analysis more complex.)

The plan of analysis consisted of four steps. The first step was to identify whether VISA students differed from comparison students in terms of the independent variables. Since students could not be randomly assigned to the VISA program or the comparison group, it may have been that the two groups differed on one or more characteristics. For instance, VISA students may have been older than comparison students or more likely to be male.

The second step was to test whether students in the VISA program differed from comparison students on any of the main dependent variables. For example, were VISA students less likely to be re-suspended? The result of this step established whether VISA participation, by itself, was related to a better outcome.

The third step was to identify which of the demographic variables (for example, age or ethnicity) on which the two groups were also related to the outcome variable.

The fourth and final step was to assess the relationship between VISA participation and the central outcome variables while controlling for the independent variables identified in the previous step (3). For example, was participation in VISA related to re-suspension after controlling for other variables that were also related to re-suspension?

Including these variables was important for two reasons. First, including them 'adjusts' for pre-existing differences between the two groups, and, second, including them accounts for a portion of the variation in the outcome measure, thereby better estimating the relationship between VISA participation and the outcomes.

LIMITATIONS

There are a number of limitations to this study that need to be considered when reviewing the findings. These are addressed in more detail in the study's technical document; however a summary may be useful at this point.

1) We were unable to randomly assign students to either VISA or the comparison group. Self-selection and availability of space determined participation in VISA. Analysis of the two groups indicated that the VISA students' demographics were significantly different on a number of variables from comparison students. Visa participants were younger, had lower GPAs the quarter before suspension, were more likely to be a grade or more behind, were more likely to be black, and more likely to have committed a violent offense. As will be shared later in the findings, these demographic variables were associated with a greater likelihood to be re-suspended thus suggesting the VISA students were, in general, a more vulnerable group. To statistically 'equalize' the two groups, we included these variables in the analyses where the variables were also related to the outcome variable.

2) A three-year study was shortened to 12 months over two school years by a teachers' strike in the first year and the loss of funding due to 9/11 in the second year. This meant we started to accept students into VISA in November of 2000 and had to close the program in early November of 2001. We had hoped to use the first full year of the project to use our experience to redesign the program for the next two years of the study. One also has to consider the possible impact of the teachers' strike and the delayed school year on the students and their behavior.

3) An important complication in the data selection was that the school district used an ad hoc method of identifying suspended students which required a careful review of each record. As a consequence we can not say with any accuracy how either group of students (VISA or comparison) differed from all suspended 6th to 11th grade students.

4) Missing data and an inability to link different school district data bases caused the exclusion of a number of VISA and Non-VISA students in the final data base. Significant effort was required to clean the data base of errors and to make as many matches as possible using information such as gender, birth dates, etc.

5) Removal of VISA and non-VISA cases from the study, due to missing or unmatched data, reduced sample size in some analyses and may have led to "trends" instead of "significant" findings.

6) The program itself went through three distinct phases during the 12 month period as staff learned from their early experiences. Only the third phase, in the fall of 2001, reflected a finished version in terms of the experience of staff, structure and program content. However, the cessation of the program as a result of 9/11 and after working with a total of only 47 students that fall means that the effectiveness of the VISA program, in its final form, is not currently known.

FINDINGS

Organization of the Data Presentation

The detailed presentation of the findings can be found in the full technical report on this program. That report includes all of the relevant methodological discussions and findings with over 70 tables reporting cross-tabulations and a number of multivariate analyses appropriate for the specific data. In order to assist the reader in negotiating the large number of findings from the study, we have selected for this document those that were either significant or showed a trend effect. They are reported in bullet form and are organized responding to the basic questions of the study. A brief discussion of each section of findings is added at the end.

The findings sections are organized in response to the following seven questions:

- 1) What was the profile of all suspended students in the sample (VISA and non-VISA)?
- 2) What were the differences in the profiles between the VISA students and the control group?
- 3) What student-related factors were associated with the following five main study outcomes?
 - Being re-suspended.
 - The length of time between initial (target suspension) and re-suspension.
 - The type of re-suspension (violent or non-violent).
 - The number of re-suspensions.
 - The next quarter marks following the suspension (target) quarter.
- 4) What did the students who attended VISA say about the program during their exit interviews?
- 5) Were there differences in the five main study outcomes (listed above) for students who attended VISA compared to those that did not?
- 6) Did the phase of the VISA program attended make any difference?
- 7) Did school size and school suspension rate have an impact on the five main study outcomes?

1. What was the profile of all suspended students in the sample (VISA and non-VISA)?

Profile of suspended students

- The total study sample of 886 students (VISA and non-VISA) had a mean age of 15 years, was predominantly male (69%), and Black (69%), and overwhelmingly served by the free lunch program (80%). (The reader is reminded that on average 58% of the school district's student population was African American.

- The profile of all suspended students in this study sample indicated that
 - 18 (2%) were in 6th grade
 - 191 (22%) in 7th grade
 - 244 (27%) in 8th grade
 - 132 (15%) in 9th grade
 - 155 (17%) in 10th grade
 - 86 (10%) in 11th
 - 40 (5%) in 12th.
 - 20 (2%) grade not specified.
- Of the total of 886 students, 549 (62%) were suspended for violent behavior and 334 (38%) were suspended for non-violent behavior. (Three students were suspended for minor infractions and those were judged to be neither violent nor non-violent.)
- The majority of students (69%) had GPAs below 70 and 35% had GPAs below 60. Only 8% had GPAs above 80.
- Students were most likely to be initially suspended in October (22%), March (17%) or February (13%).

Discussion of the profile of suspended students

In considering this data one must keep in mind that it is based on a sample of the 886 VISA and comparison students who were in the study. The study sample may or may not be reflective of the profile of the total of the 7,498 students who were suspended during the two school-years covered by the study.

Almost 7 out of 10 students were male and equal proportions were black and 8 out of 10 were economically disadvantaged. Some portion of these figures may be explained by the fact that almost 6 out of 10 students in the school district were also Black at that time. Our profile data does not tell us if being a poor, black male student leads to behavior that results in suspension or that race, gender and class tends to be factors that cause school staff to respond differently to their behavior. Also, our work in the community and in the schools (described in the conclusion of this report) has suggested to us that community-based factors in some lower income communities of color, such as gang and drug activity, may also be an external contributing factor. Certainly, students' reports in the VISA support groups of the impact of traumatic events, such as drive by shootings, seem to suggest that these events may constitute an additional risk factor or may also magnify the impact of pre-existing risk factors.

It is important to point out that there were also thousands of male, Black, economically disadvantaged students in the district schools who were not suspended or re-suspended. In addition, 3 out of 10 suspended students were white and 3 out of 10 were female and 2 out of 10 were not economically disadvantaged.

However, the findings do suggest that this population (male, black and poor) may be at some increased risk and that schools with a high proportion of these students may need additional services and attention. This issue is explored in later findings related to the impact of demographic variables and the impact of school variables. Also, the finding that 31% of the suspended students in the study were girls tends to support the informal observation of increasing school violence among young women.

That over half of the sample was in either the 7th, 8th or 9th grades is not surprising and reflects similar percentages in district-wide data and in other studies. Our own work in other projects (see the discussion section description of the Allstate project with 6th graders) has demonstrated that the transition to these grades and to new schools have hazards attached. For example, a middle or high school may draw on different communities but also different street gangs. Students who avoided certain neighborhoods will find themselves in the same school and on the same street before and after school with potentially confrontational peers.

In addition, moving into adolescence and the teen years has a number of developmental issues which may result in disruptive behavior. A student moving from the oldest grade in a school (6th) to the youngest grade in a new school (7th) raises challenges to adjustment. Once again, the data would suggest the need to focus attention on transitions and these grade levels. Finally, the drop in suspensions in 11th and 12th grades may simply be associated with disruptive students dropping out of the school system as much as increasing maturity.

2. What were the differences between the VISA students and the control group?

- Students in the VISA program were younger and more likely to be Black and less likely to be white; however, these differences were significant at only the trend ($p < .10$) level.
- Among males but not females, Black students were overrepresented in the VISA program and Hispanic and White students were underrepresented.
- The grade level placement of VISA and comparison students differed significantly. In VISA 8th, 9th, and 10th grades were over-represented and 11th and 12th grade students were under-represented relative to the comparison group
- VISA and comparison students differed significantly in the marks they received in the academic quarter they were suspended. Students with marks below 70 were under-represented and students with marks above 70 were over-represented in VISA relative to the comparison group.
- Students in VISA were significantly more likely to have had a violent infraction than comparison students (71% versus 60%).

- Students participating in VISA did not have higher next quarter marks than did comparison students after controlling for significant covariates (gender, grade level, old for expected grade, lunch code and target suspension quarter).

Discussion of differences between the VISA students and the control group

We have already pointed out the limitations of the study associated with how students were assigned to VISA or the control group. Random assignment, always the gold standard in study design, was not possible. Students (and parents/guardians) self-selected the VISA program at the time of suspension. In addition, when the program was full (30 students) it was not possible to accept students who wanted to be included. Also, there were students removed from the final data base in some analyses because of our inability to match these students to school outcome data (i.e., GPA).

Keeping these limitations in mind, in reviewing the comparison of VISA students versus non-VISA students, the VISA population was more likely to be black, more likely to be in the 8th grade, less likely to be in the 11th or 12th grade, more likely to have a lower GPA both at the target suspension and the re-suspension, and were more likely to have a violent first infraction. Since these variables tended to be predictors of re-suspension (reported later) it is clear that VISA students, on the whole, were more at risk for re-suspension than the control group.

3. What student-related factors were associated with the five main study outcomes?

Outcome 1: Being re-suspended

Profile of the re-suspended students

- Of the 144 students who were re-suspended (only 16% of the total sample of 886), 86 of the infractions (60%) resulting in the re-suspension were classified as violent and 57 (40%) were classified as nonviolent. (One student's infraction could not be classified as either violent or non-violent).
- 66% of the students with a violent re-suspension also had a violent target suspension
- By contrast, only 51% of students with a nonviolent re-suspension had a violent target suspension.
- Students who were re-suspended earned lower marks (GPA) for the academic quarter in which they were originally suspended.
- While VISA students with a GPA between 60 and 70 were less likely to be re-suspended the effect was not significant.

Of the students with additional re-suspensions, 83% had only one additional suspension, 13% had two additional suspensions, 4% had three additional suspensions, and less than one percent had four additional suspensions. On average VISA students had significantly lower GPAs for the quarter following their suspension. (VISA students also had lower GPAs at the time of the target suspension).

Ethnicity

- Re-suspended students, when compared to students who were not re-suspended, were more likely to be Black (78% vs. 67%, respectively) and less likely to be White (12% vs 22%, respectively).
- After taking other variables also related to re-suspension into account (i.e., age), Black students were 1.80 times as likely to be re-suspended as White students.

Age

- Student age was related at the trend level to re-suspension. Re-suspended students were younger than not re-suspended students.
- After taking other variables also related to re-suspension into account, students one year older were 0.81 times as likely to be re-suspended.

Economic Status

- Re-suspended students were more likely to be eligible for free lunches (85%) than students who avoided a re-suspension (79%).

Grade Point Average (GPA) at the Time of Suspension

- Target quarter (quarter initially suspended) GPA was related to re-suspension.
 - Four percent of re-suspended students had a GPA greater than 80 compared to nine percent of not re-suspended students.
 - Forty-seven percent of re-suspended students had a GPA below 60 compared to 33% of students who were not re-suspended.
 - After taking other variables also related to re-suspension into account, students with GPAs above 80 were about one-sixth (0.16 times) as likely to be re-suspended as students with GPAs below 60.
 - After taking other variables also related to re-suspension into account, students with GPAs between 60 and 70 or between 70 and 80 were both about half (0.46 times) as likely to be re-suspended as students with GPAs below 60.

Month Suspended

- Students initially suspended in the first three months of the school year were most likely to be re-suspended, and students initially suspended in the last four months of the school year were least likely to be re-suspended.
- The odds of re-suspension for students suspended in September was .31 rising to .41 in October and .49 in November, the maximum of any month of the school year.
- After taking other variables also related to re-suspension into account, students initially suspended in the fall, between September and November, were about 10 (9.92) times more

likely to be re-suspended than students initially suspended in the spring months between March and June.

- After taking other variables also related to re-suspension into account, students initially suspended in the winter, between December and February, were about four (3.82) times more likely to be re-suspended than students initially suspended in the spring months.

Discussion

A somewhat encouraging finding is that only 16% (143) of the total sample, both VISA and control group students (886) were re-suspended during the two school-years of the study. This suggests that suspension alone may have had a positive impact on student behavior. In our VISA sample admission interviews with parents or guardians, it was clear that the suspension served as a wake up call for some parents and guardians and led them to address not only school problems but other family or student personal issues as well. Also encouraging was that of the re-suspended students, 83% had only one re-suspension. The finding that two-thirds of the students with an initial violent suspension also had a violent re-suspension highlights the importance of special attention to this population.

The data also suggests an association between gender, grade level, economic disadvantage and lower next quarter marks. Gender (male), age (older students had less re-suspensions) and economic disadvantage. Our observations in the VISA Center program also suggested that failing academic performance and being “left back” a grade did have an impact on issues of self-esteem which in turn could be “acted out” through class room behavior. This suggests the importance of providing additional academic assistance to these students in addition to social and behavioral counseling.

Once again race plays an important statistical role associating with re-suspension. Black students in our sample were 1.8 times as likely to be re-suspended and had a shorter length of time (hazard rate) before they were re-suspended than white students. Younger students were also more likely to be re-suspended and more likely to have two or more additional re-suspensions. Re-suspended students were more likely to be economically disadvantaged (85%) than other students as well. GPA was also associated with re-suspension with low GPA (below 60) significantly more likely to be associated with re-suspension and students with high GPAs (over 80) less likely. Findings also indicated that students behind in one or more years in grade level (61%) were more likely to be re-suspended.

While these findings do not tell us about the mechanisms that associate these factors with re-suspension they do describe a profile of students who may be at greater risk. (It is important to remember that many students fit this profile and may not be at risk). Given the limited resources available district-wide to support students, it may be useful to develop an at-risk profile on both individual and school levels to identify populations requiring intensive interventions. Prevention services provided to students in the at-risk population and remedial services provided to suspended students who also fit the profile may be the best use of these resources. Of course, the best solution would be to provide prevention and remediation resources to all students who need them.

We should caution that these findings could lead to the danger of stereotyping individuals and groups of students and then predicting problems, which may then actually bring the problem about. This has to be avoided. Studies have indicated, for example, that randomly dividing students into two groups and then telling their new teacher that students in one sub-group may have problems can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. This information may influence the teacher's perception of the student and in turn his or her behavior towards the student. This could then lead to the emergence of the predicted problem.

The slow rise in the odds of re-suspension for our sample from .31 in September to .49 in November may be related to a teacher's reluctance to suspend early in the school year and his or her willingness to try to "reach" the student. If acting out behavior is often a signal of other problems and issues, one of the assumptions of this intervention model, then it would not be unusual for students to intensify the "signal" if it is not addressed earlier. For example, in child welfare practice a child may send an early signal of family distress and/or abuse through negative behavior often observed in the school. If not addressed, the behavior escalates in an unconscious effort by the child to call attention to the issue and to provoke an intervention to address it. This child may be categorized as the "identified patient" with teachers and other helping professionals missing the message. Training in understanding this process and in reading indirect cues and reaching for the messages behind the behavior can result in an early intervention and a reduction or elimination of the escalation that leads to suspension or re-suspension.

The findings associated with the month during the school year when students were first suspended and then re-suspended also suggests that school-wide and individual student interventions may be more effectively timed to take into account these variations. For example prevention programs for the whole school (i.e., anti-bullying) might well be offered in September when students make their transitions into new schools and then reinforcing programs offered in November when high rates of suspensions were reported. Programs for 6th graders at the end of a school year could focus on the issues they will face as they transition to a new school. (A transition program was offered by this researcher during another project funded by the Allstate Foundation, and was positively received by students, teachers and administrators).

Outcome 2: The length of time between initial (target suspension) and re-suspension

In this section we refine the analysis by taking into account the number of days until a student was either re-suspended or their follow-up period ended without re-suspension.⁵ This analysis is termed a survival analysis because our interest was in understanding whether participating in VISA, or other variables, contributed to a lengthier "survival" (avoiding another suspension). The survival period was defined as the number of days between the target suspension and the date of the next suspension or the end of the school year.

Obviously, students suspended at the start of the year would have the rest of the school year to be re-suspended while students suspended near the end of the school year would have

⁵ The latter condition existed if, for instance, the school year ended or the student transferred to an out-of-district school before the student was re-suspended.

many fewer days to be re-suspended. The variable we computed to compensate for the wide range in the number of days over which a student could be re-suspended is called the “hazard rate”. The hazard rate is the proportion of students in a group (i.e., male) who are suspended each day of the follow-up period divided by the number of students in that group who were not suspended.⁶ A low hazard rate for a group (for example, high GPA students) means that they survived without being suspended for a longer time period. Survival rates were computed for groups rather than for individual students. Significant or trend level findings were the following:

Ethnicity

- Ethnicity was related to hazard rate. Black students had a higher hazard rate than did White students or Hispanic students. Thus, as a group, Black students would be re-suspended, in a shorter period of time than white students as a group. Compared to white students, Black students’ hazard rate was about 1.7 times higher.
- After taking other variables also related to the re-suspension hazard rate into account, Black students had a hazard rate about twice that of white students.

Age

- Older students had a lower hazard rate than did younger students. A one year increase in age decreased the hazard rate by about 10%.
- After taking other variables also related to the re-suspension hazard rate into account, a one year increase in age decreased the hazard rate by about 15%.

Economic Status

- Students participating in the free lunch program had a hazard rate about 50% higher than other students.

GPA at the time of initial suspension

- Students in the highest GPA category (over 80) had a hazard rate about one-fourth as large as students in the lowest category (under 60).
- Students in the middle two GPA categories (60 to 70 and 70 to 80) had hazard rates about three-fifths as large as students in the lowest GPA category (under 60).
- As a group, students with higher GPAs had a longer survival rate than students in the lowest GPA category (under 60).
- After taking other variables also related to the re-suspension hazard rate into account students earning a GPA above 80 had a hazard rate one-fifth as large as students with GPA’s below 60.

⁶ The hazard rate is the proportion of students in a group (for example, males) who are suspended each day of the follow-up period that they have not yet been suspended. For example, if 100 students in a group remain unsuspended at the start of the 33rd day of follow-up and 12 students are suspended that day, the hazard rate for that day is $12/100 = 0.12$.

- Students earning a GPA between 60 and 80 had a hazard rate about one-half as large as students with a GPA under 60.

Discussion

The analysis of re-suspension revealed that Black students, as a group, were more likely to be re-suspended. For those Black students re-suspended, they were also found to have a higher hazard rate meaning a shorter period of time before being re-suspended.

The survival rate is seen as an important interim outcome measure. For example, in the field of substance abuse counseling the phrase “relapse is a part of recovery” recognizes that change may not be a straight line and in fact is a process. The key to understanding relapse as potentially positive is whether or not the substance abuser has learned from the relapse and can change his or her behavior. In a like manner, students who are able to manage their interactions in school for a longer period may be demonstrating increased skill in avoiding re-suspension (relapse). The relatively low number of students who were re-suspended in our study and the even lower percentage of students who were re-suspended more than once may be an indication that learning has taken place for all students. In addition, a finding reported later indicated that when controlling for age and ethnicity, participation in VISA was associated with a longer time before re-suspension (trend level). This suggests that while re-suspended students were not able to avoid re-suspension, they were able to postpone it.

Outcome 3: The type of re-suspension (violent or non-violent)

Ethnicity

- Among students re-suspended for reasons described as violent, a significant trend level was found, with Black students being overrepresented (81%).
- Among students re-suspended for reasons described as violent, a trend level found that White students were underrepresented (9%).
- Re-suspension for a non-violent reason was unrelated to ethnicity.
- After taking other variables also related to type of re-suspension (violent or non-violent) into account, ethnicity was related to being re-suspended for a violent infraction but not for a nonviolent infraction. Black students were 2.7 times more likely than white students to be re-suspended for a violent infraction.

GPA

- Students re-suspended for nonviolent infractions had lower marks than the not re-suspended students (60% of students re-suspended for a non-violent reason had a GPA below 60 compared to 33% of not re-suspended students).
- Not re-suspended students and students re-suspended for violent reasons did not differ on marks.
- After taking other variables also related to type of re-suspension into account ...

- ...students with a GPA of 80 or greater were only about one-third more likely to be re-suspended for a violent infraction than were students with a GPA of 60 or less.
- ...students with marks above 80 were fully 11 times more likely than students with GPAs below 60 to be re-suspended for a non-violent infraction
- ...students with marks between 70 and 80 were about four times more likely were about three times more likely to be re-suspended for a non-violent infraction.

Month Suspended

- Students suspended early in the school year are more likely to be re-suspended for violent infractions than for non-violent infractions.
- The odds for a violent re-suspension present a stable pattern decreasing in a roughly linear fashion from the beginning to the end of the school year.
- By contrast, the odds for a non-violent re-suspension are far more erratic with a primary peak of 0.31 occurring in November and a secondary peak occurring in January.
- After taking other variables also related to type of re-suspension into account...
 - ...students initially suspended in the first three months of school were seven times as likely to be re-suspended for violent infractions compared to students initially suspended during the last four months of school,
 - ...students initially suspended in the first three months of school were about 12 times as likely to be re-suspended for non-violent infractions compared to students initially suspended during the last four months of school,
 - ...students initially suspended in the middle three months of school were about 7.5 times as likely to be re-suspended for non-violent infractions compared to students initially suspended during the last four months of school,

Discussion

Black students in the sample were overrepresented (trend level) in the violent re-suspension group but not in the non-violent re-suspension group. They were 2.7 times more likely than white students to be re-suspended for a violent infraction. While students re-suspended for nonviolent infractions had much lower marks than non-re-suspended students, this did not hold true for students re-suspended for violent infractions.

The month re-suspended seem to have some impact with students re-suspended early in the school year more likely to have committed a violent infraction. One explanation of this may be that teachers were less likely to re-suspend early in the year unless the infraction was violent. Another explanation may be related to the issue of new students coming into schools with “foreign” gang members and needing a period of adjustment. The data indicated that students suspended in the first three months of school were seven times more likely to be re-suspended for violent infractions as students suspended in the last four months of school.

Finally, the odds for a violent re-suspension presented a stable pattern decreasing in a roughly linear fashion while the odds of a non-violent re-suspension was more erratic with a primary peak in November and a secondary peak in January.

Outcome 4: The number of re-suspensions

- Of the 144 re-suspended students, 119 students (84%) had only one additional suspension over the remainder of the school year, 19 (13%) had two additional suspensions, 5 (4%) had three additional suspensions, and 1 (< 1%) had four additional suspensions.
- Black students were more likely to have additional suspensions (more than one re-suspension).
- Students with low GPA in the target quarter were more likely to have additional suspensions.
- Students suspended earlier in the school year were more likely to have additional suspensions.
- After taking other variables related to number of re-suspension into account, age, marks, ethnicity, and initial suspension month were found to be strongly associated with having more than one re-suspension.

Discussion

Earlier findings indicated a low percentage (16%) of re-suspensions in the total sample of suspended students. This analysis reveals that 119 (83%) of the 144 re-suspended students had only one re-suspension at least for the remainder of the school year with only 25 students having two or more re-suspensions. Students suspended earlier in the school year, those with low GPA in the target suspension quarter and Black students were more likely to have more than one re-suspension. While marks, ethnicity and initial suspension month were reported in earlier analysis to be associated with re-suspension they were not differentially associated with having more than one re-suspension. This finding tends to reinforce the notion that suspension, by itself, has some impact on the student and re-suspension as well.

One implication of the findings related to GPA is that while knowing that a student has a GPA below 60 tells you he or she is more likely to be re-suspended; it does not tell you whether he or she is more likely to be re-suspended multiple times.⁷

Outcome 5: The next quarter marks following the suspension (target) quarter?

- The most important factor associated with a low GPA in the quarter following the initial suspension was a low GPA in the prior quarter.

⁷ While this is true, the reader should bear in mind that relatively few students, only 25, had two or more re-suspensions and, therefore, it is possible that had the number of students with two or more re-suspensions been larger, different results might have been obtained.

- Gender. (Males had a GPA about five percentage points lower than that for females).
- Grade (Sixth graders had a GPA about seven percentage points higher than the next highest grade level [12th graders] while students with an undefined grade placement had GPAs about four percentage points lower than the next lowest grade level [9th graders]).
- The student was behind the expected grade placement relative to their age.
- Receiving subsidized lunches.
- Suspended earlier in the school year as GPA decreased from the first quarter to the last quarter.
- After taking other variables also related to next quarter GPA into account, the prior quarter's GPA was the most important factor. In addition, being male, behind the expected grade level placement, the actual grade level placement, and the quarter when the initial suspension occurred were also important factors.

Discussion

The variables that predicted lower next quarter marks were the GPA in the quarter suspended, being male, in 6th grade, behind in grade relative to age, receiving subsidized lunches and having been suspended early in the school year. While these demographic variables are repeatedly associated with poor outcomes, it is hard to make judgments about the mechanisms of impact. The overriding variable of previous GPA suggests that these students are struggling academically as well as socially. The exact nature of the interaction between these two domains is not clear. Are students having academic problems more prone to act out socially? Does having social interaction problems affect student academic performance, or even, a teacher's perception of the student's performance. Certainly a persistent pattern of the negative impact of economic class, indicated by receiving subsidized lunches, has to draw our attention to the ongoing and persistent impact of poverty on school performance. It is important to note that when controlling for these other variables race by itself does not have a significant impact on next quarter marks.

Results from the analysis of the two-year follow-up

The analyses reported in the previous sections were repeated for the sample of students for whom we had two-year follow-up data obtained at the end of the 2001-2002 school year. Because we were unable to obtain data in the 2002-2003 school-year due to the budgetary impact of the 9/11 tragedy and the closing of the project, students who became part of the study in the second year were excluded from this analysis. Thus the number included (641) is 245 less than the original 886. This limited our ability to make comparisons between the results at the end of two years and the total sample results. This two year follow-up analysis was conducted only for the students who participated in the first school-year (2000-2201) of VISA. Also, in these analyses, we assumed that students not found in the 2001-02 data files provided by the District had not been re-suspended.

One-hundred and fifty-two (33%) of the 641 students in the two year follow-up sample were re-suspended compared to 143 (16%) of the 886 students in the total sample. Given the 245

student difference in the sample it is difficult to interpret this doubling of the percentage of suspended students. The findings that re-suspended students were more likely to be young, eligible for free lunch, in the seventh grade, male, African-American, suspended early in the school year and with GPAs below 60 was generally consistent with the earlier reported findings for the one-year follow-up of the full sample. The specific findings for this sub-set are reported in the full technical document for this study.

4. What did the students who attended VISA say about the program during their exit interviews? Did their attitudes toward participation, skills learned, etc. make a difference in outcomes?

Responses were coded into one or more of the 12 categories that emerged from themes suggested by the interviews. Of the 192 students responding to the question of whether they were helped or not, 163 students gave a total of 193 codable responses; and 29 students responded with a response not codable in any of the twelve categories, or “I don’t know” or gave no response at all.

Helped or not helped

- Of the 190 total responses to the question how much were you helped by VISA ,
 - 55% indicated they were helped a lot.
 - 39% helped a little
 - 3% not helped at all
 - Student demographic characteristics were unrelated to their perception of being helped “a lot” or being helped “a little” by their VISA experience.

We were interested in whether or not the student’s perception of being helped or not impacted on any of the other outcome measures. Only 119 of the students who provided exit surveys could be matched to student data from the school district and were included in this analysis.

- VISA students’ perception of how helpful VISA was to them was not significantly related to whether they were re-suspended or their next quarter marks when contrasted with the control group proportions.

Most useful things learned

- Of the 192 total responses on the exit interview inquiring about the most useful thing learned in VISA
 - 75% of the responses were categorized as social skills (for example, conflict avoidance, anger management, thinking before acting).
 - 4% of the responses identified academic skills.
 - 11% about black history and racism
 - 15% were no response or uncodable.

Skills actually used

- There were 159 total responses (from the VISA sample of 192) to the question asking what skills were actually used (for example, academic skills, avoidance of conflict, self-control).
 - 52% of the responses indicated no skill was actually used.
 - 6% academic skills
 - 43% social skills
- Female VISA students were significantly more likely to report using a skill than were male students.
- VISA students whose grade level matched their expected age were also significantly more likely to report using a skill.
- There was a trend level relationship between grade level and using a skill. However, there seemed little pattern in the results for this variable.
- Among students who used a skill, seventh and ninth graders were under-represented while eighth and tenth graders were over-represented.

Of the 119 exit interviews for students who we were able to match to school data we found the following:

- VISA students who indicated that they learned social skills had the best marks in the next quarter and the VISA students who said they learned no skills had the worst marks. (Due to small numbers in the categories these results did not reach the level of trend significance).
- VISA student who indicated that they learned academic skills were in a middle group between best marks and worst marks (also non-significant).
- VISA students who reported using a skill were no different on the re-suspension variable or the next quarter grades variable than students in the control group (non-VISA).

Discussion

Ninety-four percent of the students who completed the exit interview indicated that they were helped. Fifty-five percent were helped a lot and thirty-nine percent helped a little. Only 3% indicated that they were not helped at all. This reflects our general impression of the students' response to the program evidenced through their regular attendance and active participation. Most striking were the number of students who visited the program after they had returned to their schools. This led to our setting up an informal after school program to legitimize their visits. These findings were echoed by parents and guardians and by most of the teachers and principals from the 53 schools involved.

When asked to respond to a request to identify the most useful things learned 75% indicated social skills, 4% academic skills and 11% black history and racism. Students who indicated that they had learned social skills had the best next quarter marks and those that

indicated no skills learned had the worst. It may well be that academically challenged students experienced the program differently than those with more successful academic records.

Of course perception of having been helped does not necessarily lead to changes in behavior. Students who indicate they learned specific skills do not necessarily use them when they return to school. Although 75% of the students found social skills the most helpful thing they learned only 43% indicated they actually used them. This may be because it was more difficult to move from understanding to action when returned to the school setting or because they did not find themselves in situations where these skills were needed.

For the 119 student exit interviews which we could match to school data VISA students who indicated they had learned social skills had the best marks in the next quarter and the VISA students who said they learned no skills had the worst marks. VISA student who indicated that they learned academic skills were in a middle group between best marks and worst marks. These findings were not significant nor did the reach trend level partly due to the small sample. VISA students who reported using a skill were no different on the re-suspension variable or the next quarter grades variable than students in the control group (non-VISA).

5. Outcomes for students who attended VISA compared to those that did not?

Outcome 1: Being re-suspended?

- Twelve percent of the White students in the comparison group were re-suspended versus none in the VISA group ($p < .05$).

Outcome 2: The length of time between initial suspension and re-suspension

- After controlling for the effects of ethnicity and suspension quarter marks
 - Participation in VISA was associated at a trend level ($p < .10$) effect of a longer time without re-suspension.
 - VISA students had a re-suspension risk 0.85 times of students in the comparison group).
- VISA students with a GPA over 80 were about half as likely to be re-suspended as students with a GPA under 60 when compared to control group students.
- VISA students with a GPA between 70 and 80 were about two-thirds as likely to be re-suspended as students with a GPA under 60 when compared to control group students.

Outcome 3: The type of re-suspension (violent or non-violent)?

- Participation in VISA was unrelated to the type (violent versus non-violent) of the next suspension.

Outcome 4: The number of re-suspensions?

- Participation in VISA was unrelated to the number of re-suspensions.

- Suspension quarter marks were significantly related to one re-suspension but were unrelated to two or more re-suspensions.

Outcome 5: The next quarter marks following the suspension quarter?

- VISA students had significantly lower GPAs for the quarter following their suspension than non-VISA students.
- However, VISA students also had lower grades during the target suspension semester and had more students with demographics (for example, ethnicity and age) that were associated with lower grades.

Discussion

VISA participation appeared to have a more positive impact on some students however the impact was impacted by demographic factors. For example, none of the VISA White participants were re-suspended compared to 12% of the White students in the control group. When we controlled for ethnicity and suspension quarter marks VISA participants had a significantly lower re-suspension risk of .85 compared to students in the comparison group. In another example of the interaction between VISA participation and other variables, VISA students with a GPA over 80 were about half as likely to be re-suspended as students with a GPA under 60. Students with a GPA between 70 and 80 were only two-thirds as likely to be re-suspended as those with GPAs below 60.

When compared with the control group, participation in VISA was unrelated to the type (violent versus non-violent) or the number of re-suspensions. VISA students did have significantly lower next quarter grades however they also had lower grades at the time of their first suspension and tended to fit the demographic profile of students with lower next quarter grades in general.

As stated earlier in this report, the issues of missing school data resulting in the need to drop both VISA and non-VISA students from the sample as well as the late start and the abrupt end to the project has left to a future study a full test of the effectiveness of the VISA model.

6. Did the phase of the VISA program attended make any difference?

Given the difficult start of the program (teachers' strike two month delay) and the abrupt ending of the program (second-year ending of the program due to September 11th related loss of funding) we were unable to follow the original plan of a one-year program and instrument development stage followed by a two complete school-years program and a two-year follow up for all students (VISA and non-VISA). We did decide to conduct one analysis of what we perceived as the three phases of the project within the project to see if when the students attended VISA, by itself, might have made some difference.

The results on re-suspensions were not significant; however, the earlier described reductions in sample size, the brief periods of each of the three phases and the need to make methodological adjustments due to equalize the maximum follow-up period for all students may have contributed to the lack of significant findings. We did observe, however, that the comparison in Phase I indicated that 27% of the VISA students were re-suspended compared to only 10% of the control group students. The percentages between the two groups were relatively close for Phase II and Phase III suggesting that the difficult start-up period in Phase I may have had an impact on the overall findings.

7. Did the school suspension rate have an impact on the five main study outcomes?

The analyses reported in previous sections have focused on individual, i.e., student-level variables such as suspension quarter marks or gender to explain variability in the likelihood of re-suspension and other outcome measures. In this section we add a school-level variable, school suspension rate, to examine the effects of school-specific suspension rates and individual characteristics on the rate of re-suspension and on next quarter marks. This analysis was complicated by the fact that students were referred from schools with a range of grades (for example, Kindergarten to 8th grade, 5th to 8th grades, 9th to 12th grades, 6th to 8th grades). Given what we know about the distribution of suspensions by grades, schools with younger students or even older students might have lower suspensions rates. To compensate for this, the suspensions rates were converted in the analysis to take the school's grade distribution into account.⁸

- VISA program and comparison students were drawn from 54 different schools representing a range of school configurations (e.g., pre-K to 5, 6-8, 9-12) from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade.
- There was substantial variation in the suspension rate, both between schools and between the two study years. In the first study year suspension rates for schools ranged from a low of 0.51% to a high of 24.63%.
- VISA program students came from schools with a mean school suspension rate of 14.93% while comparison students had a mean school suspension rate of 14.76%. The difference was not significant.⁹
- There is some evidence that all students in this study coming from schools with higher suspension rates were significantly more likely to be re-suspended.
- When the analysis included other variables such as age, ethnicity, lunch program eligibility and target suspension month, all variables previously identified as having a relationship with re-suspension,

⁸ Formulas for this conversion as well as others in the study can be found in the methods section of the full report. A table listing actual suspension rates by school is also included in that report.

⁹ However, we would note that the number of schools relative to the number of students, particularly in the VISA program group make finding differences difficult because many schools had less than three students in the VISA program group.

- The school suspension rate does not especially contribute to understanding re-suspension over and above other variables except for the survival rate.
- The school suspension rate maintains its independent impact on the survival rate (length of time without being re-suspended) with students attending schools with lower suspension rates surviving longer
- The data supports the hypotheses that the school suspension rate association with re-suspension may actually be due to the impact of the demographics of the specific school's population.
- The data indicates that as school suspension rates rise, students will be re-suspended more quickly.
- Students from schools with higher suspension rates had significantly higher marks in the quarter following the target suspension.
- However, when suspension rate was included, while also taking into account the other significant demographic predictors of next quarter marks, school suspension rate loses its significance as an independent predictor of higher marks in the following quarter.

Discussion

The review of the literature (see Appendix A) indicated that a number of studies had found school-level and district level factors, such as criteria for suspension, that appeared to impact the rate of student suspensions. Simply put, did your chance of being suspended increase or decrease depending on which of the 53 schools in our study you attended. Our work over the years in the Buffalo public schools, and in other school districts, had led us to informally observe that the leadership provided by the Principal and the level of experience of the staff could have a profound impact on the culture of the school.¹⁰

We have seen schools change dramatically in terms of structure and staff morale with a change in Principals. We have also observed very different procedures for dealing with re-entry of suspended students upon their return from suspension. These have ranged from an immediate intervention by a school administrator who would use the report on the student sent by the VISA Center staff to start a conversation on how to avoid re-suspension to the other extreme where a student is sent to the lunch room for most of the day and then returned to class without a serious intervention.

Availability of more intensive services provided, for example, by social workers, guidance counselors, school nurses and school-based community agency staff might make a significant difference in helping the student make a successful re-entry to school and by responding to early signals of student problems. Such a quick response can prevent first suspensions or re-suspensions. Unfortunately, it is exactly these services that are often cut in times of financial exigency such as those currently faced by the Buffalo school system. In the

¹⁰ The PI of the study has conducted training on supervision for elementary, middle and high-school principals in other school districts. He has co-authored a book on leadership entitled: Handbook of Basic Skills and Strategies for School Principals. Co-authored with Lawrence L. Giandomenico. Springfield, Illinois: Charles Stuart Publishers, 150 pp. (1991).

conclusion of this report we address a number of ways in which the school can make a major difference.

Finally, a factor not addressed in this study is the racial composition of the teaching staff in the system. The Buffalo public schools have a significant majority of white teachers dealing with a significantly larger number of Black students. This raises inter-ethnic issues that may impact the trust, communications and interaction between students and staff. The same effort at setting limits by a Black teacher with a Black student may be experienced very differently if the teacher is White. With race a generally taboo issue in our society, these attitudes may exist below the surface and exert a powerful impact unless dealt with directly. Intra-ethnic issues may also emerge where Black students react to discipline by a Black teacher or administrator who they may feel has “sold out”. Community-wide attitudes related to race can also influence how a student experiences school in general and specific staff in particular.

This issue needs further study with the possibility of more intensive efforts to assist staff not only in identifying cultural differences, for example between different Hispanic or Native students, but also developing culturally sensitive skills and interventions for breaching the gap and dealing directly and skillfully with potential student and parent ethnicity-based barriers. It’s important to point out that experienced teachers and administrators have developed and implemented such skills and that the problem may often be more of student perception than reality. Given that race keeps emerging as an important variable in this report future study in this area would be helpful.

As for the findings on school suspension rates, we found a substantial variation in the suspension rates of the 54 schools in the study. The suspension range, after some adjustment for the grade composition of the school, ranged from a low of 0.51% to a high of 24.63%. Students attending schools with higher suspension rates tended to have a higher number of re-suspensions whether in VISA or in the comparison group. When the other variables such as age, ethnicity, lunch program eligibility, etc. are taken into account, the school’s suspension rate does not by itself contribute to the re-suspension rate. The finding that student may be more likely to be re-suspended in schools with higher suspension rates may be more related to the demographics of the school’s population than any other school-related variables. This is an important area for future study.

In contrast, school suspension rate does impact the survival rate (how long students go without re-suspension) even when these other factors are taken into account. You are likely to have a lower survival rate in a school with a higher suspension rate.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the complications in the study design introduced by the teachers’ strike at the start of the study and the 9/11 related early ending of the project, VISA appeared to have some impact on some students. When we asked the students during the exit survey if VISA helped them, 55% said they were helped “a lot” and 39% “a little”. Approximately half of the students indicated in follow-up that they had used skills they had learned. Only 3% indicated they were not helped at all. Student perception of helpfulness and skill use did not appear to have a

significant impact on whether they were re-suspended or not when compared to the control group. There was some impact for those who indicated they had learned and used social skills in that they had better grades than the students in the control group in the quarter following the suspension.

While VISA did not appear to help all students avoid re-suspension or lengthen the time they survived without re-suspension, it did seem to help some students with these outcomes. For example, none of the white students in the VISA program were re-suspended. When ethnicity and suspension quarter marks were controlled in the analysis, VISA students were less likely to be re-suspended (0.85) when compared to the comparison group and had a longer survival rate (length of time without suspension). Grades mattered as VISA student with 70 to 80 GPAs and students with over 80 GPAs were also less likely to be re-suspended.

The study does support the idea that race, gender, age, economic status, grade point averages and being behind in school are related to negative outcomes such as re-suspension. It is clear that the school violence and suspension issues are complicated. While we can see these complex associations from the findings we are still unclear how the factors impact the process – that is – the mechanisms by which these variables singularly or in combination exert their influence. In the next sections we draw upon the study findings and our more informal observations of the problem over the past nine years, during which we provided some form of program to Buffalo schools, to describe the problem's dimensions and to propose a model for prevention and intervention.

It is widely recognized that many schools within urban districts face a crisis related to disruptive and often violent behavior by students. Teachers and administrators are asked to address a range of problems among their students, including drug use, weapons, and violence against other students, teachers and staff. Not only do these behaviors distract staff from their basic educational function, they also create an unsafe environment that interferes with the ability of all students to learn.

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. Many of the in-school conflicts are related to community and family issues. In our experience with students who attended the VISA program, as well as those with whom we worked with in a number of Buffalo elementary, middle and high schools on violence prevention, anti-bullying, transition to middle school and conflict mediation efforts, we have found that this behavior on the part of students is usually sending a message. For each student, the message may differ, and may signal such issues as physical, emotional or sexual abuse; drug addiction; gang-related conflicts; unrecognized learning disabilities; post-traumatic stress after witnessing violence in the home or neighborhood; absent parents (for example, an incarcerated parent); and a pervasive sense of hopelessness about their futures.

Teachers and administrators experience severe stress as they try to deal with both the basic educational mission and the violent and, at times, personally threatening student behavior. Requests for transfers, absenteeism, and burn-out are not infrequent outcomes in many difficult school settings. The result is often a reactive effort to address the problems, with insufficient time dedicated to pro-active preventive efforts. Resources to support the educational staff are often lacking, and where they exist, budget restraints often make them the first target of cuts.

In addition, the community itself must be mobilized to address issues that affect children when they attend school. For example, in the Kensington Community Project described in the section below, we developed a coalition representing schools, police, community agencies, probation and parole offices, the District Attorney's office, the FBI, the housing authority, local parents and ministers that met once a month to discuss collaboration in one neighborhood, one housing project and one school. The goal of the collaboration was to reduce school violence. Partnerships were developed that would never have happened in the absence of this community coordination led by myself and the head of the Buffalo Housing Authority.

For example, a ministers' sub-group was established to train a group of ministers who then joined local probation officers on visits to children who were on probation and their families to offer support. In another example, drug dealers and key players in local gangs were identified and arrested when involved in illegal activity near the school or in the housing project, now defined as a federal offense. A plan was developed so that these negative role models were prosecuted and when convicted, sent to federal prisons far from Buffalo, thus limiting their ability to influence local gangs from prison.

The message of this conclusion is that the problem of school and community violence is complex and not addressed by easy one-shot answers. It requires a significant amount of collaboration, skill and commitment, but it can be effectively addressed for most if not all children. The research on resilience is clear; it may take only one teacher, family member, coach, social worker, etc. to make a profound difference on the ability of a child to overcome tremendous obstacles and to become an educated and productive citizen.

Appendix A

A Prevention and Intervention Model

Through the work with students in the VISA project, consultations and workshops with school staff and a number of other projects implemented by this researcher and the UB School of Social Work over the years, we have developed an integrated model for prevention and intervention in school and community violence. The time and type of interventions needed include the following:

Violence prevention programs within the schools for students and staff

Over the past eight years we have provided a number of programs in different Buffalo public schools designed to inoculate students before they become involved in disruptive and/or violent activities. For example, a program funded by the Allstate Foundation was provided to 5th and 6th graders to prepare them for their transition to middle school. Structured exercises and group discussion helped them to anticipate stressful situations and to develop strategies for more effective coping.

Working in collaboration with the Child and Family Services of Erie County, Circle groups were provided by professional staff and trained parents in the community in a number of middle school classes. These programs, drawn from a national Restorative Justice model, provided regular opportunities for students and teachers to address potentially difficult situations in the class prior to their eruption in violence. The model used the students themselves to help resolve conflicts and by doing so deepening their own understanding of the required social skills to avoid conflicts that can lead to suspension. Anger management modules and other social skills presentations and discussions highlighted alternatives to violence. Mutual aid processes helped students identify their sources of stress and to find alternative ways to address them.

Anti-bullying discussions in another school helped students to understand the bullying phenomenon, to develop strategies for dealing with it if bullied, and encouraged by-stander activity that might decrease the need for resolving conflicts through physical means. Students were asked to take some responsibility for decreasing the conflict rather than their usual response of urging it on.

Other programs have used professional actors to work with a select group of student leaders and to develop a dramatic presentation to large groups of students that focuses on the issues raised by the students themselves. These presentations were followed by discussion groups often led by a leadership core of students to address the problems acted out in the presentation.

In-school programs for students who have been removed from classrooms

In another school in which we provided a program, full-time professional staff was available in an office for immediate counseling of a student removed from a classroom for a fight with another student or conflict with a teacher. Counseling provided the student with an opportunity to review the circumstances that led to the conflict, to simply cool down, and to

develop strategies for returning to class and coping with the problem more effectively. In some schools, specially staffed classrooms were maintained to which students were sent for individual or sometimes, informal small group conversations to attempt to find a resolution to a problem. If handled well, the conflict became a live learning experience for the student while still in school.

These projects were well received by both students and staff and were seen as an important part of the student support system. After development of trust with the professional staff (social workers and graduate social work students) students would come on their own to request intervention to avoid an impending fight. Without this resource the issue would have to be settled after school, on the streets, or else the student would feel they had lost “face”. Unfortunately, as with many of the programs described here, they were provided through special funding (state grant, private foundation, etc.) and were not automatically built in and available in all schools.

Out-of-school programs or programs in special schools or areas of a school for students who have been formally suspended

The VISA program is one example of a short-term, out-of-school program that seeks to address the underlying issues acted out through the behavior. In some situations it is best to get the student out of the school setting to break a cycle of conflict. The formal suspension also gets the parent or guardian involved and with the VISA program this included referrals to community agencies for children and adolescents. The structure of the program was described earlier in this report and will not be repeated here. An important element is the maintenance of academic support so that the student does not fall further behind in class work. The association with low GPAs and being behind a grade in this study suggests that academic performance and self-image may be closely tied together.

Re-entry services that address the needs of suspended students when they return to their regular schools or to other schools if transferred

The first day back is a particularly vulnerable time as students may face the same issues that led to their original suspension. In the VISA program a report on the student’s progress during the two weeks was faxed to the school in advance of the student’s re-entry. The report attempted to provide the school with our understanding of issues underlying the acting out behavior. It reviewed the student’s progress in the program and made specific recommendations for ongoing assistance to reinforce gains. In those schools where someone was specifically assigned to meet the student, review the two-week program and work out a plan for implementing new learning and dealing with inevitable crisis, we believe through informal observation that this assisted the student in avoiding re-suspension and maintaining longer periods of survival without re-suspension.

Community collaboration

As pointed out earlier, problems in the schools do not occur in a vacuum. Collaboration with the local police, state, county and federal authorities, community agencies, community groups, politicians, housing project staff, the courts, employers and the local ministers needs to be fostered to address these issues.

Finally, although the problem is complex and multi-faceted, we believe for most students, perhaps not all, an integrated intervention can break the cycle of violence and failure and help the student overcome obstacles to a successful and safe integration into the world of adulthood and meaningful work. A student's ability to survive and thrive may be profoundly affected by their family, their neighborhood, the school they attend, their gender, race and prior educational and life experience. While it may be affected by all of these, it does not have to be determined by these factors.

Finally, we believe nothing short of a Mobilization for Youth, similar to an effort supported by the Kennedy administration in the 60's in the lower east side of Manhattan, that addressed school, community, and world of work issues is needed in Buffalo and in all large urban centers. Our failure to implement such a program could lead to the loss of another generation of youngsters and we will pay the price at some point because the fate of all of us is intimately entwined with the fate of our children.

Appendix B

Literature Review

What Do We Know About Predicting Suspensions?

The definition of suspension varies according to school district policies and individual school practices. Some schools practice ‘in school suspension’ (ISS) while other schools utilize ‘out of school suspension’ (OSS), and other schools employ forms of both ISS and OSS in their disciplinary practices. In theory, the purpose of suspending a student from school is to reduce the probability that a student commits another offense that is serious enough to require another suspension (Mendez, 2002).

Age/grade

The age/grade of a student correlates with the likelihood of suspension. Raffaele-Mendez, Knoff and Ferron (2002) found that almost one quarter (24.41%) of the middle school students in the district studied experienced at least one suspension during the 1996-1997 school year. This was compared to 3.36% of elementary school students, and 18.46% of students in high school. The rate at which middle school students were referred for discipline has been calculated by Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) to be 40%. In speculating ‘why’ a high rate exists among middle school students, Skiba, et al., theorizes that, developmentally, middle school students are struggling with issues of identity and authority; thus it is not surprising that problems with authority represent the most common reason for disciplinary referral in the middle school level.

Race

Student race is also a factor when it comes to school suspensions. Disciplinary referrals for African American students are often higher than their White or Hispanic counterparts. In a study conducted by McFadden and Marsh (1992) African American students accounted for 22% of the student population, yet represented 36.7% of all disciplinary referrals. In this same report, African American students accounted for 43.9% of all OSS, yet only 23% of all ISS. A report published by the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice found that information collected by the Applied Research Center from ten school districts across the country support the finding of African American students, both male and female, being suspended at rates disproportionate to their school enrollment. The disproportion has a wide range, from a low of being 1.4-2.8 times more likely for an African American student to be suspended from school than a White student, to a school district in Arizona, where African American students were suspended at a rate of 22 times that of White students. A study of two ‘similar’ schools conducted by Skiba, et al. found that even in a district with a high proportion of African-American students, African-Americans were referred to the office (and suspended) more frequently than other ethnic groups.

Gender

Age and race are not the only predictors of school suspension. The focus of much research has been on the discrepancies between boys and girls when it comes to school

discipline. Gender differences can be large when comparing suspension rates. Raffaele-Mendez, et al. reported findings that included males accounted for over 70% of all suspensions, which is significant, taking into consideration that boys made up 51% of the student population. Combining race and gender as predictive factors for suspensions Raffaele Mendez, et al. found that Black males were suspended much more frequently than were other students. This trend was evident across grade levels, but peaked in middle school where almost half (48.9%) of Black males experienced a suspension compared to 25% of White males and 33.95% of Hispanic males.

Socio-economic status

Students who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds have been found to be over-represented in school disciplinary referrals. Skiba, et al. found that students receiving free or reduced cost lunch were more likely to have a disciplinary referral than those on full pay status, and, in turn, higher rates of suspension. Raffaele-Mendez et al. notably found a high correlation between the suspension rate and the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch. However, they were quick to point out that for each of the high suspending schools with the above demographics there are low suspending schools with the same demographics. This indicates that the demographics noted are correlational and not causal and that other variables help to account for the total variance in predicting school suspension rates.

Special Education Status

Another group of students who are over-represented by school discipline referrals and suspensions are students in special education (Skiba, et al.). Morrison and D’Incau (1997) linked special education status with increased suspension and expulsion rates during their study of 158 expulsion files from a medium sized, suburban school district. Their findings showed that 22% of the expelled students were special education students, even though that figure is significantly higher than anticipated for the size of the school district. Another finding from their study concerned recently decertified students, or students who were recently removed from special education. Out of 35 special education students expelled from this district during the study, 10 of them fell under this recently decertified criterion. In retrospect, however, the district found that four of the students were determined to be eligible for special education services after their expulsion from school. Rose (1988) focused on suspension usage with handicapped students and found that learning disabled students are suspended at higher rates than are behaviorally disordered or mentally handicapped students. Another finding of Rose’s study was that students with mental handicaps are the least likely to be suspended or expelled, whereas students with behavior disorders are most likely to be expelled.

Cooley (1995) conducted a study in Kansas schools utilizing a survey presented to 552 middle school and high school principals with a response rate of 80%. The purpose of the study was to determine if students with disabilities were suspended at rates differing from their school enrollment. The study determined that students with disabilities were suspended or expelled at a rate of twice their school enrollment. Of the students with disabilities who were suspended or expelled, 87% of those students were either diagnosed with behavior disorders or learning disabilities.

The enrollment of students with behavior disorders (1%) or learning disabilities (4.5%), in Kansas schools totals 5.5%, but these two categories represent 22% of students suspended or expelled. The study also looked at the acts for which students were suspended and expelled and found that there were no significant differences in the types of incidences between the students with disabilities and those without.

Other results showed that 83% of students suspended were male. In this study findings indicated that white students were represented proportionally and the sample of suspended students. In addition, black and Hispanic students were not suspended at a rate that was statistically significant when compared to their enrollment numbers.

School Characteristics

When looking for predictors to suspension, one must take the context by which suspension is used into consideration. If a school uses suspension only in response to situations where physical violence has occurred, predictive behaviors may look different than for schools that utilize a form of suspension in response to insubordination, for example, which can take on a myriad of definitions and interpretations. Christle, Nelson and Jolivette (2004) compared characteristics of schools that had high rates of suspension to those of schools that had low rates of suspensions. They surveyed 161 schools in Kentucky and found significant differences in this comparison. Schools with high rates of suspension described their school climate as good only 27% of the time (in comparison to 100% of the low suspension schools.)

High suspension schools had poor level(s) of family involvement, while none of the low suspension schools reported this. Staff in high suspension schools perceived less support from their administration, and described the disciplinary measures in their schools as not effective. Staff from the high suspension schools also indicated a need to reduce suspensions at their schools (63%), as opposed to only 13% of low suspension school staff indicating this need. Low suspension schools showed some differences that were important to note. They had more artistic and student-created displays, the cafeterias resembled restaurants, and were scored slightly higher with regards to school cleanliness, condition and order.

The size of the community and school also had an effect on the use of suspensions (Rose, 1998). Larger communities and schools utilize out of school suspensions significantly more often than those in small and very small communities. Regional differences regarding the use of out of school suspensions were also discovered. According to this study Principals in the New England and West North Central regions were most likely to implement out-of-school suspensions; principals in the West South Central were least likely. Also, female principals were significantly less likely to exclude (suspend) students (Rose, 1998).

Burns, Moore, Hoover Stephan, Pruitt, and Weist (2005) conducted a study within the Baltimore City Public School System that looked at elementary schools and compared suspension usage and schools with expanded school mental health services. The study looked at 82 schools, 41 with expanded school mental health services and 41 without. Schools were matched for comparison purposes and the outcomes found that there were no significant differences between the groups with regards to the suspension rates or the average length of

suspension. School attendance rates were significantly negatively associated with overall OSS rates and also with average total days of OSS.

The study also showed that the rate of students in poverty, the length/duration of suspension and the total days of OSS for the school were all positively correlated with the overall school suspension rates. Both school size and attendance rate were determined to be the significant factors in predicting overall OSS rates for a school (the smaller enrollment and the higher rate of attendance). The existence of expanded school mental health services were not determined to be a significant predictor of overall OSS rates for a school.

Student Behaviors

It has long been surmised that students may view a suspension as a ‘vacation’ or an ‘easy’ way to get out of class. Students agreed with this belief when Costenbader (1998) asked students to report on their experiences when suspended. In this study, students were asked to describe the problem which had caused them to be suspended. Forty percent of the students attributed their suspensions to their own lack of self-control.

Previous studies have identified specific student behaviors that correlate positively with suspension and include: ineffective social skills, disruptive behavior, reactive aggression, proactive aggression, hyperactivity, and fighting (Atkins, et al., 2002), tardiness, disruptive classroom behaviors and forging excuses; smoking, alcohol or drug use, lack of cooperation, skipping class, fighting, possession of a weapon, insubordination, extortion, and drug possession and show evidence of being involved with the legal system at a higher rate than their peers (Costenbader & Markson, 1998.) Besides these actions, other studies found positive correlations between academic and social skills deficits among adolescents displaying serious behavior problems (leading to suspension) (D’Atrio et al. 1996). Hay (2000) reported that students suspended from school demonstrated low parent and school self-concepts but higher peer self-concepts. Morrison et al. (2001) found that students who had never been suspended before reported higher levels of personal optimism than those students who had a history of previous suspensions.

School Policies

Schools have varying policies regarding specific behaviors. Gottfredson (2001) showed the contrast by which some schools utilize an automatic suspension in response to specific behaviors; while other schools have no behavior for which a suspension would be considered automatic. Comparing schools within the same district showed that district policies are able to be interpreted by building administration, and do not allow for complete comparison.

A study of Florida’s second largest school district by Raffaele-Mendez, et al. agreed with this assertion. Although the administrators of all of the district’s schools were working from the same list of behaviors/infractions eligible for OSS, they have no standardized guidelines to follow to determine the appropriateness of OSS, or the length of OSS for specific behaviors and infractions. This lack of standardization among schools within a district allows for a considerable variability between schools in the types of infractions that resulted in suspension frequently as well as the length of an individual suspension.

Comparing data continues to be difficult regarding factors associated with suspensions. School districts painstakingly work on disciplinary policies intended to inform staff, parents, and students alike of specific policies. One study reported that, at the school their data came from, 20% of all suspensions were actually in violation of the written school disciplinary policy, and 45% of all disciplinary actions did not correspond to stated policy in some way (D'Atrio, et al. 1996). These noted discrepancies add to the drive to determine predictive factors to suspension, as suspension rates may not reflect the amount or the degree of deviant behavior in a school (Galloway, 1976).

Teacher Referrals

While attention has been paid directly to student behaviors, researchers are now also looking at classroom factors which contribute to suspensions. The environment of the individual classroom may have as much to do with student suspension, as individual student personalities and actions. Mendez (2002) compared schools with high rates of out of school suspension (OSS) and low rates of OSS, to determine what, if anything was different between the two types of schools. In the low OSS schools, Mendez found that teachers participated in more instances of mentoring students than in the high OSS schools. Schools with low rates of out of school suspension (OSS) reported a greater emphasis on staff development and training as a first step in improving the classroom management practices of teachers than high OSS schools. Low OSS schools also reported that teachers received more varied help when having difficulty with discipline in their classrooms than high OSS schools. High OSS schools were more likely to see limited alternatives to suspension than low OSS schools, according to Gottfredson (2001), and middle schools generally report more prevention activity than do elementary and high schools.

Another factor in comparing suspension information resides in the fact that the majority of referrals for discipline come from individual classrooms, and not from a centralized/uniform source. It has been stated that disorderly classrooms provide training grounds for delinquency by making rule-breaking behavior more salient and providing visible rewards for such behaviors (Gottfredson, 2001). Consistency of discipline continues to be difficult as many students do not view suspension (in school or out) to be a punishment. Also, ineffective classroom management may be responsible for discipline referrals, as referrals are often easier and faster than utilizing more difficult classroom techniques.

Garibaldi, Blanchard, and Brooks (1998) discovered a link between conflict resolution training, teachers' classroom management practices, and the tendency on the part of teachers to suspend or expel student rather than resolve conflicts within the classroom. One reason for a lack of congruence among these factors may be the varying interpretations of student behavioral incidents by teachers and school administrators. Skiba, et al. broke down referrals for discipline by administration, staff and teachers. From this breakdown, it was noted that ten teachers accounted for 48.2% of all referrals. This count illustrates the need for coordination of discipline throughout both individual schools as well as throughout the district. It further illustrates the complexity of discipline systems as there is little evidence of a consistent relationship between seriousness of offense and severity of consequence (Skiba, 1997).

What Do We Know About Predicting Re-suspensions?

Morrison et al. (2001) found that students with previous suspensions and previous office referrals had GPA's below 2.0 in contrast to their counterparts. Students with prior suspensions were re-suspended for attitude offenses 40.9% of the time, and for being outwardly aggressive 31.8% of the time, while students who were being suspended for the first time were suspended for attitude offenses 8.2% of the time and for being outwardly aggressive 73.85% of the time. Students who had been previously suspended showed lower levels of social responsibility and lower endorsement of peer norms regarding academic excellence than students who had not previously been suspended.

Morrison and D'Incau (1997) studied characteristics of students who had been recommended for expulsion from school. Students in this study were categorized by frequency of discipline and severity of offence. One group of students was described as first offenders. These students did not have histories of multiple disciplinary referrals or suspensions, and appeared to be either reacting to a family crisis or involved in an incident isolated from their generally appropriate behavior at school. Students who were not first offenders were characterized by several opposite characteristics. These included minor to significant disciplinary histories, behavioral or emotional problems, significant family issues and cry for help type offences. These students were classified in this study as disconnected, troubled, or socialized delinquent. Risk factors for first offenders, and troubled students showed some striking differences. Family problems were shown to have marked differences between the first offenders (13.6%) group and the troubled (80.5%) group, and emotional problems were evident in 2.3% of the first offenders group and in 80.5% of the troubled group. Also, of the troubled students, 22% had experienced noted abuse, whereas the first offenders had no instances of abuse reported. The similarities among risk factors were in the area of family crisis where roughly 12% of both groups were experiencing family crisis at the time of last incident.

Resiliency factors also had differences. Files of students in the first offenders group and troubled group evidenced varying levels of school support, which, for the purposes of this study, indicated that there were letters of support in the students file from teachers or school staff. Fifty percent of the first offenders group had school support while only 14.6% of the troubled group had school support. The first offenders group also evidenced significantly higher levels of reading comprehension and math competency, while the troubled group showed a higher level of support from community agencies. Neither group was significantly involved in extracurricular activities.

In 1980 Sweeney-Rader, Snyder, Goldstein and Rosenwald reviewed a new in school suspension program at George Washington High School. Their findings included that 50% of all suspended students were newcomers to the school and were 9th graders who had entered in the fall. The majority were recidivists. Reasoning that students gave for being repeatedly suspended included that they felt they could still not fit in to the school. Clearly, they had not been helped by their previous suspensions. In fact, by excluding them from the school community, suspension only served to increase their feelings of loneliness and to reinforce the feeling that no one cared.

The use and effectiveness of suspensions also come into account when attempting to predict future suspension. Atkins, et al. (2002) reported that for the students whose rates of disruptive behavior accelerated across the year, the high use of detentions and suspensions represented an inappropriate and ineffective use of a punishment procedure. In this study, students who were suspended in the fall semester only evidenced 'mild' behaviors, which did not increase throughout the school year. In contrast, the students who were suspended in both the fall and spring semester evidenced escalating negative behaviors. Interestingly, the fall group did not differ from the never group on any of the teacher or peer rating measures, but differed from the fall and spring group on teacher ratings of social skills, disruptive behavior, reactive aggression, proactive aggression, and hyperactivity, and on peer ratings of disruptive behavior and fighting. Findings suggest that impulsivity may also be a marker for highly disruptive school behavior that is resistant to standard discipline for children residing in inner-city communities.

What Do We Know About the Impact of Programs for Suspended Children?

Depending on the way a local school board of education writes, interprets, and applies its policies, reasoning for the suspension and re-suspension of students varies greatly; as do alternatives made available for these students. With reference to administrator and teacher efforts in establishing and enforcing clear, consistent discipline policies in Part 2.2.4, the Northwest Regional Education Library (1995) strongly recommends the [avoidance of] expulsions and out-of-school suspensions whenever possible, making use instead of in-school suspension accompanied by assistance and support (p.5, electronic copy). Since publishing the first comprehensive Synthesis of Effective Schooling Practices in 1984, the Northwest Regional Education Library (NWREL) has meticulously reviewed educational literature for two consecutive updates of the synthesis, one in 1990 and the most recent in 1995. The variances in the way individual schools undertake improvement, and in particular the discipline of students, has helped fuel the 20-year effective schooling research movement conducted by NWREL.

Given the fact that in- and out-of-school suspension and re-suspension continue to be widely utilized despite research-based warnings regarding their effectiveness, and indeed their iatrogenic effects; and given the wide range of rigor in evaluating suspension programs, we developed a four letter rating scale that allowed us to categorize the available literature as Grade A [experimental; random assignment to conditions]; Grade B [quasi-experimental; treatment v. comparison group without random assignment]; Grade C [baseline v. baseline; i.e., comparative end-of-year measures]; Grade D [no comparison group].

There could easily be as many examples of alternative to suspension programs as there are individual teachers, assistant principals, schools and/or school districts! They vary sharply between punishments ranging from verbal reprimand to permanent suspension/expulsion; and strategies to increase desired behavior ranging from praise to display of pupil work (Parker-Jenkins, 2004). Out-of-school suspension is a dramatic and often traumatic intervention designed to provide immediate relief for the school and teacher, while isolating the student and applying pressure to the parents or guardians (Vanderslice, 1999). In-school suspension is one of the most familiar institutional interventions, generally intended to reinforce the value of individual students, responsibility for learning, and offer opportunity for behavior change (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 35). Some emphasize school-community relationships, others school-wide

interventions, and still others offer specialized services through partnerships with local service agencies.

Suspension is a discipline strategy that requires careful assessment of helpfulness, due and fair process of students' rights, and possible negative outcomes, for students, staff, and school (Chobot and Garibaldi, 1982; Hudley, 1994; Mizell, 1978; Radin, 1988; Williams, 1979). The Ministry of Education in British Columbia (1999) acknowledged that suspension may indeed contribute to lowering self-esteem, diminishing self-discipline, intensifying aggressive behavior, increasing avoidance behaviors, decreasing academic success, putting children and youth at greater risk of abuse or of engaging in dangerous behavior, increasing drop-out rate, and increasing youth crime (Ministry, p. 21). It would seem imperative then that any program implemented as an alternative to suspension, with the intention of minimizing re-suspensions, be designed with the capabilities for addressing five factors commonly associated with suspension: a history of discipline referrals, below grade level academic performance, one or more grade level retention, history of multiple school enrollments, and enrollment in schools with higher-than-average rates of suspension (p. 11).

Additionally, the report recommends the prudence of providing individual-level follow-up in terms of problem-specific counseling and instructional activities that teach replacement behaviors (Ministry, p. 25); and institutional-level follow-up in terms of improving school climate, and involving parents (Ministry, Chapter Four, p. 27-38).

A report submitted to the Ministry of Education in British Columbia by its own Special Programs Branch in 1999 summarized over 20 years of educational research in North America, indicating the general irrelevance of factors including age and location of the school building, class size, and the professional experience of the administrators and teachers (p. 12); while strongly emphasizing that:

...students who lack essential interpersonal skills, thinking skills, and decision-making skills are more likely to have problems with behavior in school and interpersonal relationships in the school community. These essential skills cannot be addressed adequately when the student experiences lengthy or repeated suspensions from the school setting. (p. 8).

Defiance, insubordination and noncompliance are repeatedly identified as the most common reasons recorded in district disciplinary data in support of a referral for suspension, while more serious forms of infraction are far less frequently recorded as reasons for suspension (Cooley, 1995; Edelman, Beck & Smith, 1975; Landon & Messinger, 1989; Safran & Safran, 1984; Skiba, Reece, & Williams, 1997). In a survey conducted in a probability sample of 848 U.S. public, private and Catholic schools, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) found that an average 74% of participating schools used unofficial suspension from school as a specific response to undesirable student contact (77% elementary schools, 78% middle/junior high schools, and 66% high schools); and an average 89% of participating schools used official suspensions ≤ 30 days (86% elementary schools, 97% middle/junior high schools, and 94% high schools). The concurrent policies, procedures and programs may or may not reflect empirically-sound information available regarding the effectiveness and efficacy of suspension programming in relation to the implied or stated goals of their use.

Of the 33 documents reviewed, 14 are school-based programs reporting on themselves, five are outside agencies reporting on their services to suspended students either in-site or in the private sector, 12 are studies conducted by researchers in a variety of fields including education, educational psychology, and school psychology, and one supports corporal punishment in the form of 'paddling'. Every program noted the objective of reducing suspensions, and particularly out-of-school suspensions because of the per day financial losses they represent, both here and in the UK. They varied in duration from one day a week (Morrison, Anthony, Storino & Dillon, 2001) to a year long; from a few minutes (the paddling) to two hours daily for four days per week.

The program with the greatest longevity (15 years) offered little more than an administrative framework in the way of program description, no empirical support for an obvious commitment to the program, and no empirical support for its claim of effectiveness. We might surmise commitment to particular programs or to suspended students from the installation of full-time personnel appointments to the implementation of the program (Alamance-Burlington School system (2005); Farrell, Meyer, & White, 2001; Meadowbrook Elementary School, 2005; On Campus Intervention Program, 2005;) and be completely unable to surmise the commitment to program or student from the description of a camera-monitored program run in the complete absence of personnel.

Whitfield and Bulach (1996) conducted a study of a large, suburban Atlanta high school regarding the effectiveness of an in-school suspension program. Questionnaires were filled out by 67 staff members and 107 randomly selected students from the high school. Findings indicated that students preferred punishments in the reverse order of their severity. Fifty percent of the students surveyed preferred out-of-school suspension (OSS) to in-school suspension (ISS), and sixty percent preferred ISS to detention. This high school had an ISS program which included counseling and academic support. Survey responses, however, indicated that 67% of faculty respondents did not discuss student assignments with the ISS director, and 63% of faculty respondents did not believe that students received counseling while participating in ISS. Staff perceptions went on to include that seventy percent of staff surveyed believed that students did not return to class with an improved attitude.

Appendix C

Student Characteristics

Table 1 presents the age, gender, race, ethnicity and lunch program eligibility information for the VISA, comparison, and total samples. The categories defined by the school district are Black (Not Hispanic), Hispanic, White (not Hispanic) and a fourth category combining American Indian, Alaskan, Asian or Pacific Islander.¹¹ The total sample had a mean age of 15 years, was predominantly male (69%), Black (69%), and overwhelmingly served by the free lunch program (80%). Of the total district student population for the 2000-2001 school year of 43,858 students, 25,223 (57.5%) were Black. For the 2001-2002 school year of the 42,941 students 24,829 (57.8%) were Black. It should be noted that the percentage of Black students in the study sample (69%) was significantly higher ($p < .01$) than in the larger district population.

Relative to comparison students, students in the VISA program were younger and more likely to be Black and less likely to be white; however, both of these differences were significant at only the trend ($p < .10$) level.¹²

Ethnic information was also broken out by gender. Among females, the proportions of students of each ethnic group did not differ between VISA and comparison groups. However, a difference, albeit at trend level, was found for males. Among males, Black students were overrepresented in the VISA program and Hispanic and white students were underrepresented.

¹¹ Because of the very small numbers of the fourth combined category in our sample these students we chose to include these students in the White not Hispanic grouping for our analysis purpose.

¹² Throughout this report we will use the term “significant” when referring to findings if the associated test of significance yielded a $p \leq .05$ result. That is, there were only 5 or less chances in 100 that the difference resulted from chance. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, and the smaller numbers in some of the analyses we will also report a “trend” when the test of significance yields a ($p \leq .10$) result.

Table 1
Sample age, gender and ethnicity comparison

		VISA N = 179	Comparison N = 707	Total Sample N = 886
Mean age in years (<i>SD</i>) ⁺		14.9 (1.3)	15.1 (1.7)	15.1 (1.6)
Gender	Female	54 (30%)	218 (31%)	272 (31%)
	Male	125 (70%)	489 (69%)	614 (69%)
Ethnicity ⁺	Black	136 (76%)	476 (67%)	612 (69%)
	Hispanic	14 (8%)	79 (11%)	93 (10%)
	White ^a	29 (16%)	152 (22%)	181 (20%)
Lunch eligibility	Not eligible	39 (22%)	139 (20%)	178 (20%)
	Eligible ^b	140 (78%)	568 (80%)	708 (80%)
Female	Black	42 (78%) ^c	162 (74%) ^d	204 (23%)
	Hispanic	5 (9%)	19 (9%)	24 (3%)
	White	7 (13%)	37 (17%)	44 (5%)
Male ⁺	Black	94 (75%)	314 (64%)	408 (46%)
	Hispanic	9 (7%)	60 (12%)	69 (8%)
	White	22 (18%)	115 (24%)	137 (15%)

Notes. ^aWhite/non-Black includes American Native/Alaskan Native and Asian/Pacific Islander.

^bIncludes free lunch, free/direct certified lunch, and reduced fee lunch.

^cPercentage computed as African-American females in VISA divided by total females in VISA.

^dPercentage computed as African-American females in comparison divided by total females in comparison. ⁺*p* < .10.

Table 2
Sample school demographics and performance comparison

		VISA N = 179	Comparison N = 707	Total N = 886
Target suspension grade level***	6 th	0	18 (3%)	18 (2%)
	7 th	38 (21%)	153 (22%)	191 (23%)
	8 th	64 (36%)	180 (26%)	244 (28%)
	9 th	31 (17%)	101 (14%)	132 (12%)
	10 th	35 (20%)	120 (17%)	155 (14%)
	11 th	4 (2%)	82 (12%)	86 (10%)
	12 th	2 (1%)	38 (5%)	40 (5%)
	Undefined grade	5 (3%)	15 (2%)	20 (2%)
Years behind grade level	Not behind	282 (40%)	64 (36%)	346 (39%)
	One or more	425 (60%)	115 (64%)	540 (61%)
Target suspension quarter marks**	Over 80	4 (2%)	71 (10%)	75 (9%)
	70-80	58 (33%)	179 (26%)	237 (27%)
	60-70	70 (39%)	279 (40%)	34 (40%)
	Under 60	46 (26%)	169 (24%)	215 (24%)

Notes. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2 compares the grade level and academic performance of VISA and comparison students. Looking first at the total sample, 7th and 8th grade students formed just over one-half of the sample and 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students comprised just over one-third of the sample. VISA and the comparison students had significantly different grade level distributions. VISA students were overrepresented in the 8th grade (36% versus 26% for comparison students) and in the 9th and 10th grades to a lesser extent; and underrepresented in the 11th and 12th grades (11th grade, 2% vs. 12% comparison; 12th grade, 1% vs. 5% comparison).

Turning to the grade point average (GPA) earned in the academic quarter in which they were suspended, VISA and comparison students also differed significantly. About equal

proportions of VISA and comparison students had GPA's in the 60-70 point range (~40%) and the less-than-60 point range (~25%). However, in other ranges, VISA and comparison students had different GPA distributions. VISA students were underrepresented among students having a GPA of at least 80 (2% versus 10%) and overrepresented among students having a GPA of 70 to 80 (33% versus 26%). Thus, although only at the trend level in some instances, the VISA students differed from the control group on a number of variables (race, GPA, etc.) that both the literature and our findings indicate have an impact on rates of suspension. This issue is addressed later in this report.

Table 3 presents the data on the type of infraction resulting in the target suspension. For students assigned to the VISA program, the target suspension was the suspension which resulted in the student being referred to VISA; for students in the comparison group, the target suspension was the first suspension of the school year. Overall, just over three-fifths of students in the sample had a violent infraction. Students in VISA were significantly more likely to have had a violent infraction than comparison students (71% versus 60%).

Table 3
Comparison of the type of infraction resulting in the target suspension

		VISA N = 179	Comparison N = 707	Total Sample N = 886
Target Suspension ^{a*}	Violent	127 (71%)	422 (60%)	549 (62%)
	Nonviolent	51 (29%)	283 (40%)	334 (38%)

Notes. ^aTarget suspension: missing 3 cases (minor offenses not coded as either violent or nonviolent). * $p < .05$.

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