Stakeholder Perspectives about Developing and Implementing an Online Alternative to Out-of-School Suspension for First Time Substance Use Policy Violators

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore statewide stakeholder perspectives about developing and implementing an online alternative to suspension (ATS) program in the Northwestern United States for youth who have violated school substance use policies. Out-of-school suspension has been linked to negative outcomes and alternatives to keep youth in school are desperately needed. Qualitative description methodology with content analysis was used to analyze data gathered from 201 stakeholders (principals & vice principals). Three themes were identified that described stakeholders' perspectives about the development and implementation of an online ATS program: 1) the program must be impactful, 2) have a high degree of usability, and 3) additional support may be necessary. Themes identified can guide the development and implementation of an online ATS program. In collaboration with stakeholders, the initiation of an online ATS program could reduce out of school suspensions for middle and high school age youth.

1. Introduction

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP] Policy Statement, out-of-school suspension is counterproductive and leads to numerous negative outcomes for youth, communities and society as a whole [1]. Students who are suspended are more likely to drop out of high school, enter into the juvenile justice system, misuse substances, and experience declines in academic performance [1-6]. In addition, high school dropouts are then at higher risk for more health ailments and shorter life spans when compared to other youth who go on to graduate [1]. Although there is strong evidence about the negative consequences of out-of-school suspension, rates continue to rise, and more than 18,000 students are suspended from public schools in the U.S. every day during the academic year [2]. In response to the growing numbers of suspension, which often occur for minor school policy infractions, the AAP has identified the desperate need of developing and implementing alternatives to the typical practice of out-of-school suspension for school policy infractions [1].

An in-school, online intervention tool would help to alleviate the long-term impacts of suspension and expulsion first and foremost by keeping the student on campus for their discipline. To begin to address this need, collaborators set out to gather state-wide stakeholder input to propose next steps in developing and implementing an online alternative to out of school suspension for youth (6th-12th graders) who violate the drug/alcohol/nicotine policy for the first time. The feedback from the stakeholders will determine the feasibility and acceptability of developing, testing and implementing an online drug and alcohol education module. This module would be designed for students in grades 6–12 as an early intervention and would be appropriate for students

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who are experimenting or at the early stages of substance use involvement. This module could provide an alternative to a full-term out-of-school suspension. This paper describes the qualitative component of the mixed methods study and will present key stakeholders' subjective perspectives about the idea of an online alternative to suspension for junior high and high school students.

2. Background

After the passing of legislation that legalized the sales of recreational marijuana in one state in the Northwestern United States, public school data demonstrated tobacco (including e-devices) and marijuana policy infractions alone accounted for 23% of the suspensions and expulsions for students. Furthermore, suspensions for drug and alcohol policy violations comprise roughly 13% of all out-of-school suspensions throughout the same state. Drug and alcohol related violations in this state receive the lengthiest suspensions, several days more on average than fighting with a major injury and possession of a weapon (alcohol 9.8 days, illicit drug other than marijuana 11.6, marijuana 12.3, possession of a weapon 7.4, and violence with major injury 6.7). This is quite concerning considering that when budgets were cut by congress for Safe and Drug Free Schools funding in 2011, schools' ability to provide in-house alternatives to suspension for tobacco and substance use related issues were lost as a by-product of the funding cut. Because of this, school districts are looking for ways to eliminate or reduce out of school suspensions, with little to no additional resources or capacity to do so.

In 1994 the Clinton Administration signed into law legislation involving zero tolerance for guns in school [4]. The legislation required all primary and secondary schools in the U.S. to adopt a zero-tolerance policy along with mandatory tracking systems for the possession of a firearm on campus in order for the schools to receive federal funding for public school education [4]. Students who violated the policy were immediately suspended out of the school setting. Schools broadened the zero-tolerance policy to include other offenses such as fighting, drug use and possession, and behavioral problems occurring in classrooms [7]. However, the administration of the zero-tolerance policy was still at the discretion of individual schools and districts [8]. Evidence demonstrates that zero tolerance policies are generally ineffective. Instead, for some students a suspension for a school policy violation might serve as a reward

instead of punishment [9]. Other studies have shown a relationship between the implementation of the zero-tolerance policy and decreased academic achievement [10-11]; increased school dropout rates [12]; higher likelihood of accidental injuries, increased risk for use of illicit substances, and engaging in violent behavior [6, 8, 13]. Zero tolerance policy has also been linked to higher rates of recidivism [9-10, 14]; negative mental health issues [8, 15] and cognitive dysfunction [16]; increased financial burdens to the government, schools, families and communities [17-19]; and involvement with the juvenile justice system [5, 19].

It's been more than 20 years since the implementation of the zero-tolerance policy legislation, yet suspension continues to be a major issue negatively impacting youth. When a student experiences an out-of-school suspension or expulsion, current studies show that the student is at higher risk for poor grades, heavy substance use, dropping out of high school, getting involved in illegal activity, and many more undesirable outcomes [20-22] In addition, racial and ethnic school disciplinary disparities have been found throughout national, state, and local level data, using a variety of measures and at all school levels and typologies [23-25]. Students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionally expelled more often than white students [23-25]. The long-term price of suspension is often paid by the community, in addition to the school, the family and the student.

Out-of-school suspensions are considered "exclusionary" discipline because students are removed from their stable educational environments [1]. Suspension is therefore linked with negative school climates, increased rates of misconduct, and repeat offenders [11-12, 22]. There are numerous negative psychosocial long-term consequences for students who are suspended from school after violating school policy. For example, students who are suspended are less likely to experience school connectedness, academic success and successful passing of their current grade [26-28]. Schools with higher suspension rates have lower levels of overall student academic achievement. Out-of-school suspension is associated with increased rates of student involvement with the juvenile justice system, often termed "school to prison pipeline" [1, 4-5, 12]. Implementing action plans that engage students in an alternative to out-of-school suspension have been shown to positively affect attendance rates, school involvement, and feelings of community engagement [26-28]. There is strong evidence indicating that in-school alternatives to out-of-school suspension can

improve youth outcomes, such as decreasing the likelihood of marijuana use, improving graduation rates, and improving the safety of communities [20-22]. Online alternatives to suspension programs have the potential to change behaviors amongst youth policy violators. Online modalities would provide easy to access options and would be available any time for use as an alternative to suspension. Exploring the unique perspectives of stakeholders (principals and vice principals) involved in middle school and high school disciplinary practices and policies is a necessary first step in developing and implementing an online alternative to full-term out-of-school suspensions. The primary purpose of this study was to explore state-wide stakeholder perspectives about developing and implementing an online alternative to suspension (ATS) program for youth (6th-12th graders) who have violated school substance use policies for the first time. Although technology solutions have shown promise in addressing youth substance use issues, an online program to reduce out-of-school suspensions is a novel intervention. Therefore, it is important to explore stakeholders' views about the possibility of using an on line program as an alternative.

3. Methods

Qualitative descriptive methodology and qualitative content analysis methods were used to describe stakeholder participants' perspectives by identifying common themes about developing and implementing an online alternative to suspension program [29-30]. Qualitative description is used when the goal of the research is to summarize descriptions of events or experiences in a way that depicts the perspectives of the participants [29-30]. Common themes are identified in qualitative description to provide definitions and details of the most prominent ideas provided by the participants' responses [29-30]. The methodology accomplishes the purpose of the present study by exploring the participants' perspectives about developing and future use of an online alternative to suspension for youth who have violated school substance use policy. The feasibility and acceptability of such an online program can be described from the stakeholders' viewpoint by allowing the subjective input of the stakeholders to be summarize through the identification of common themes [29-30]. In order to create and implement an online alternative to suspension in the future, the researchers believed the qualitative approach used in this study would provide important and rich detail

from the stakeholder participants' unique perspectives. Gaining input from stakeholders who would be involved in implementing the online program is crucial for future success. This paper will describe the qualitative piece of the mixed methods study that utilized qualitative description methodology with content analysis methods to analyze the data.

3.1 Data Collection

Data were collected via administration of a cross-sectional, 16-item, confidential online survey. The survey was sent out through secure online survey links that were emailed to principals and vice principals throughout a state in the Northwestern U.S. The survey links were emailed to the stakeholders through email newsletters, and targeted listservs. Qualtrics was used to develop and deliver the online survey, store responses, and analyze the data to produce descriptive statistics. The survey was sent out along with several email reminders from 6/9/16 through 6/23/16. Study participants included 201 stakeholders with 77% of the responses coming from principals (n=155) and the other 23% (n=46) of the responses coming from vice principals; 43% of the school districts responded to the statewide survey. Most of the school districts were rural (51%), with 34% of the stakeholders classifying their school districts as suburban and 15% as urban. All procedures for the study were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University. The qualitative data for this study included stakeholder responses to five open-ended questions that were gathered as a part of the cross-sectional 16-item online survey. The survey questions were geared towards gaining input about the possibility of an online alternative to out-of-school suspension for first-time drug/alcohol/nicotine policy violators. It is important to point out that at the time of the survey, a specific online alternative program had not been developed or identified. Therefore, the future online alternative to suspension program was generally described as, "The online alternative would consist of an online substance education module that students would complete independently." The five open-ended questions relevant to this qualitative study were: 1) "Please tell us more about your thoughts regarding an alternative to suspension program for students who violate your school's substance use policy." 2) "Describe how marijuana is impacting your students" 3) "In your opinion, what practices or programs do you believe prevent students from engaging in policy infraction activities?" 4) "In your

opinion, what has helped reduce recidivism among students who are caught violating your drug/alcohol/nicotine use and possession policies?" and 5) "Please tell us about any other substance use issues that are preventing learning in your schools" The participants' text responses to these open-ended questions provided the data used for this qualitative descriptive study.

3.2 Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis methods as described by Schreier were used to analyze the data [31]. The qualitative data from Qualtrics was transferred into a word document for analysis. The data (responses to the five open-ended survey questions) were anonymous survey responses therefore deidentification was not a necessary step. Qualitative content analysis steps included combing concept-driven and data-driven analysis approaches to the text [31]. This means that the research team used their content expertise, qualitative expertise and prior experiences to identify common themes describing participants' perspectives about an online alternative to suspension [31]. Following Schreier's qualitative content analysis methods, the authors initially read through the word document of the participants' responses separately and made notes describing their ideas for potential themes based on commonly identified statements throughout the data. The researchers then met in person to discuss and compare initial findings. This meeting included reviewing initial thoughts about commonalities within the data, labelling and naming themes, and identifying the strongest supportive quotes [31]. A coding frame was established early on in this process that was based on the agreed upon themes [31].

Using the coding frame as a reference, the research team continued with analysis by further describing themes and contrasting similarities and differences among themes [31]. The researchers met several more times to continue this process until all themes and definitions were thoroughly supported by the data [31]. Trustworthiness and rigor of the study was met by having each researcher initially individually review and analyze the data prior to each meeting and then compare agreement between the researchers [31]. Consistency was high among the identified themes and supporting quotes. Validity was also addressed by considering the applicability of the themes when compared to the participants' responses and the overall purpose of the study [31]. An audit trail was kept throughout the analysis process to document decisions and next steps.

4. Findings

Three general themes were identified that described stakeholders' perspectives about developing and implementing an online ATS program. Themes describing important components to include in the development of the online program included: 1) the online option must be *impactful*, and 2) have a high degree of *usability*. A third theme describing an important consideration for future implementation of an online ATS was also identified. The third theme included the acknowledgement that *additional support* may be necessary for success. The three themes will be described in the following section of the paper and supportive quotes will be provided to illuminate the findings.

4.1 Impactful

The stakeholders commonly reported that an online alternative to suspension must have an impact on the students. Participants made numerous comments describing their support of having impactful ATS options. For example, they explained that the online program needs to be "meaningful," "engaging," and "influence behavior." The necessity of creating an online option that makes an impact can be illustrated with the following quotes:

1st offenders need education; if an online module can be created that is engaging and "real" from a student's perspective, the impact would be greater than the standard "Don't do drugs" lecture from an administrator, counselor or police officer.

Suspension is a tricky....We have very few alternatives. I like the idea of some sort of early intervention module - but I want it to have some 'teeth' to it too.

It needs to be a combo that includes consequence, education, & support to enable changed behavior.

Students who are not violating still need to see something meaningful happen to a student who brings drugs/alcohol.

Stakeholders are in favor of an online alternative to out-of-school suspension if it would make an impact. Participants described this as wanting an online option that would still be meaningful and potentially make an impression on the student who has violated the substance use policy. For example, one stakeholder discussed how the students who would participate in the online program, "need to be engaged in activities with peers in a drug free environment with explicit instruction on the impact of drug use." The stakeholders described desiring an online option that would still be viewed as some type of punishment/consequence for the student and they also described the importance of including educational content around substance use to influence future behavior and decision making. The importance of developing an impactful online option with substance was shared by most respondents and is further supported with the following stakeholder statements:

> Supportive of an alternative that educates student and requires completion of tasks/program before re-entering classes.

> Any alternative to suspension for marijuana needs to get their attention and protect the other students.

> The alternative would have to be solid and not just a "slap on the wrists" that has no effect in stopping or altering the behavior.

Although nearly all the participants expressed positive comments around the idea of an online ATS, the main concern towards this option was that it must come across as making an impact on students. Participants' stressed the importance of the online option as coming across in a similar way as the typical out-of-school suspension i.e. as a type of serious punishment for the violation.

4.2 Usability

Participants commonly discussed the importance of user friendliness and overall practicality when developing online alternatives to suspension. Usability of an online option was described as a program that would be convenient, easily available, easy to use and access, and efficient. The idea of having an easy to use online choice available was highly supported. An online option that would be easy to access and implement was strongly supported

throughout the data. Participants' emphasized that if the online program was not user friendly it would not be used. The following quotes depict Stakeholders' perspectives about the importance of a high degree of usability when considering an online alternative:

> Having the program available on line would benefit our school.

> I also think that the online alternative to a suspension needs to be a sustainable option for schools, and accessible for families.

Having an online option that could be usable by an entire district or even at the state level was also commonly discussed in the stakeholder responses. The following quotes illuminate this point:

> I would absolutely LOVE to have a state-wide program available to all public schools for offenses related to drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, and I would hope all administrators feel the same way. PLEASE KEEP MOVING AND MAKE THIS HAPPEN!!!

> The more structures of this sort (online) that can be automatic and district directed the better off we would be.

> An educational component that we can all access and record would help us meet our mission.

4.3 Additional Support

Implementation of an online alternative to out-of-school suspension would most likely require support and resources. Depending upon the school district some schools may require additional assistance while other schools may already have enough support to implement an online program. Additional support could involve staff, parents, and community involvement. Consideration of potential support needs to successfully implement an online alternative to suspension is illustrated with the following stakeholder quotes:

> This takes people to support our students.

> Putting somewhat of a burden on parents may be helpful.

There would need to be intentional communication with our community leaders and parents.

Would be great if we had the capacity (staff & spacing) to house it.

Stakeholders commonly described the dire need for additional resources to help address substance use problems in their schools. Although participants were generally in favor of an online alternative to suspension, they also identified the need of a multifactorial approach to the substance use issues affecting their students. The following statements help describe the common theme of needing additional support:

Our biggest problem is getting resources and counseling for students. We have none in the district and it is costly to the students unless court provided.

Providing an alternative is a great idea. Often these students need more than just a one day video training, they need counseling

We are a high poverty school with easy access to drugs and alcohol for youth, including drug and alcohol involved parents. What is needed is a proactive method of helping students find a different way to cope with the challenges of poverty and generational substance abuse. We would be in mentorship programs and activities that help students find hope to make positive changes in their lives. Sending kids home just interferes with their learning and creates another avenue for failure and loss of hope and a future.

The need for additional support to back up an online alternative to suspension was viewed as a potential negative aspect if the alternative option would require a great deal of resource support.

5. Discussion

Three general themes emerged through our analysis of the stakeholders' responses to the open-ended questions about developing and implementing an online alternative to out-of-school suspension. Participants strongly support an online option that would be *impactful* and have a high degree of

usability. For implementation purposes, stakeholders identified the need for *additional support* for such an online program to be successful. Gaining stakeholder perspectives was an important first step in intervention development. Next steps can incorporate the identified themes into identifying appropriate online substance use programs currently available that could be quickly implemented as alternatives to out-of-school suspension. Existing online programs could be tailored based on the identified themes to increase the likelihood of success with this population. The themes can also be used to guide the future development and implementation of online alternatives to out-of-school suspension for youth who violated school substance use policies.

The availability of quality online alternatives to suspension could address stakeholders' desire for programs that are impactful and offer high degrees of usability. For example, advantages of Internet-based interventions for a variety of health promotion topics are well-supported in current literature, including those specifically targeting substance use [32-35]. In terms of usability, online applications can provide interactive, affordable, standardized, scientifically sound information to large numbers of people and can be updated as new evidence is found. When considering online programming, electronic tools such as email, online assessments, and rapid scoring and tracking of data can assist in ongoing communications and feedback. Additional components can be used such as audio/video, online social networking, and graphing capabilities that can provide creative and engaging environments for learning that are particularly helpful for younger viewers [36-37]. Online programs are beneficial when a need exists for personalized programs that can meet the needs of the individual and the specific topic at hand [38]. Keeping the importance of student impact in mind, customization has been found especially useful when creating programs for young people based on social norms feedback so they can compare their substance use to others in their peer group [38].

The possible need of additional support to enhance alternatives to suspension was commonly shared as a concern by the stakeholders. An online option may help address this concern by keeping the need for increased resources to a minimum. Internet delivery of psychologically-based treatment has been found to be more cost efficient and consistent than other types of therapy [39] and can yield cost savings in medications, non-medical costs, work loss, and domestic loss [40]. Expense and variable adherence have also been noted

as barriers to traditional face-to-face therapies, particularly for youth in substance use treatment [37].

Additional benefits of online programs are that they can offer 24-hour access, and privacy, which is crucial when dealing with youngsters and substance use issues. Other advantages are that online programming can be made accessible to those living in rural areas, those with disabilities, or those who lack reliable transportation. This is particularly important to our stakeholders as more than 50% labelled their schools as "rural." Along with the benefits noted, computer-assisted treatments have been found to be efficacious for substance use issues [32-33]. Online programs have the potential to improve the efficiency of treatment and positive outcomes can be expected while reaching people who may otherwise not have access.

There are several potential online substance use educational programs currently available. Some examples include Third Millennium Classrooms' evidence based online programs for alcohol, nicotine and marijuana [41]. All their online programs incorporate social norms theory, are tailored to the individual student, and employ motivational interviewing techniques in an easy to access online format [41]. For example, Alcohol-Wise is a 1-hour online alcohol abuse prevention course designed specifically for use on college campuses for first-year students and other high-risk populations. Courses can be accessed from any computer, tablet, or smart phone. There are validation features within the courses to ensure honesty and to confirm identity. The goal of the course is to educate students about the harmful effects of alcohol, raise school retention rates, and to help reduce future alcohol-related violations. While there is compelling evidence demonstrating encouraging benefits from participation in 3rd Millennium's online programs, most of the research has focused on college age students and alcohol [42-49]. Collaborating with stakeholders and having them review current options such as Third Millennium Classrooms educational modules, would be an important first step in the implementation process of an online alternative. Feedback could be gathered and additions or revisions to the modules could be done in collaboration with the company. Further research is necessary to assess the benefits in middle school and high school aged youth, as well as potential impacts on substances other than alcohol. Pilot testing with this population would be important and the evaluation could assess impact, additional support needs and usability before launching a larger study.

In terms of the identified themes of *impact* and *usability* when considering online alternatives to suspension it is also important to reflect on the behavior change support system (BCSS) perspective. A BCSS has been defined by Oinas-Kukkonen as, "a socio-technical information system with psychological and behavioral outcomes designed to form, alter or reinforce attitudes, behaviors or an act of complying without using coercion or deception" [50-51]. The desired outcomes of BCSSs have been proposed as three categories of change, 1) complying, 2) behavior changes and 3) attitude [51]. Each category can be further broken down in terms of forming, altering or reinforcing the specific desired change/s [51]. Complying involves the act of doing what the online program or module is requesting of the user. For example, the student user of an online alternative to suspension module who completes the program and passes the required end of program exam would be complying by demonstrating their increased knowledge relevant to substance use as a result of completing the requirements of the online module. Changes in behavior involves a step above complying in that the goal involves the user demonstrating some type of behavior change because of complying. This could be demonstrated by a subtle decrease in substance use or something more drastic like abstaining from using any substance. Attitude changes involve the ability of the online program to encourage shifts in the way users view the behavior. It makes sense that changes in attitude would be important when the desired outcomes of an online system involve the desire for changes in behavior. Other key components involved with BCSS that also overlap with the study findings are the idea that systems should be user friendly and include persuasion to illicit meaningful behavior change [50-54]. When considering online alternatives to suspension it would be crucial to use the tenants involved with the BCSS perspective to help evaluate current options to identify programs that would have impact and appropriate usability. The BCSS lense can also assist in the development of new online programs.

While social norms-based interventions have shown promise, one systematic review found web-based interventions for alcohol use among college students had small effects and are probably not effective alone to prevent substance use [55]. Computerized school-based programs for youth in other health promotion topics have also shown acceptability, yet effects can be modest and short-term [56-57]. Therefore, it is critical to understand stakeholder's needs before embarking on any new

interventions to maximize impacts. Including stakeholders and students in the development of online ATS programs could improve the feasibility and potential influence on behavioral change that these online options intend to accomplish. Overall, there is a need for more research on long-term outcomes related to online program in substance use populations, particularly among youth, along with better understanding about online program elements that are most essential for success [58].

6. Conclusion

The three themes identified in this study provide specific areas to consider when developing and implementing online alternatives to full term out-of-school suspension for youth who violate school substance use policies. The new knowledge generated from this study should also be considered when implementing online alternatives to suspension that are currently available. Gaining perspectives from stakeholders who will play a key part in implementing online interventions can assist in the delivery of feasible and acceptable online programs.

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