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Alternative School Placement Policy

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Alternative School Placement Policy

Current Policy Statement

Hamilton County Tennessee currently has one alternative school which covers sixth through twelfth grades. One principal, two administrative staff, one educational service coordinator, nine teachers, four cafeteria and custodial personnel, and two School Resource Officers are assigned to the school. The school provides an alternative education setting to the student's host school. Assignments range from thirty (30) to one hundred and eighty (180) days.

Hamilton County Department of Education has a Code of Acceptable Behavior and Discipline that is published and handed out at the beginning of every school year and contains a parental/student notification form that must be signed by all students and their parents/guardians in the sixth through twelfth grades. This code of conduct briefly describes the types of offenses, the resulting discipline, and the appeals process.

Alternative school placement is largely at the discretion of the host school principal and Superintendent. School administrators must notify the parent/guardian in writing of the placement and their rights to appeal within twenty-four hours of the decision. A student can be placed at the alternative school for major (alcohol, assault, vandalism, weapons) offenses or minor misconduct (truancy, indecent language, disrespect to teachers/administrators). Once committed to the alternative school, a behavior or educational plan is developed by the host school and the alternative school in a meeting that includes host school teachers, both principals (host school and alternative school), the educational service coordinator, the student, the parent/guardian, and the school social worker *if the placement is attendance related*.

Appeals must be filed with the administrator (usually the principal at the host school) either orally or in writing within five (5) calendar days of the notice. The first level of appeals is

a committee of three school administrators. This hearing must be held within ten school days after the placement. Only a school representative and the student will be allowed to present the case to the committee. Either party may have an attorney present as a *silent* witness. The committee may:

1. decide in favor of the school administrator
2. override the suspension
3. assign the student to an alternative program
4. suspend the student for a specified length of time

The decision may be appealed to the second level, which is the Superintendent or his/her designee. At this level either party may have an attorney speak on their behalf. The superintendent must be notified orally or in writing within five calendar days of the first level hearing. The same four options may be handed down at this level of appeal. The decision can be appealed to a third and final level, which is the Board of Education. The Board must be notified within five calendar days and can act upon the review of record or conduct their own hearing. The board has the same four options as the appeals committee. The Board decision is final except for zero tolerance violations in which the Superintendent had final authority.

History of Alternative Placement

School districts across America are grappling with what to do with students who disrupt the learning process. Alternative schools emerged when many students were being suspended or expelled from school for disciplinary reasons and left to wander the streets. Supervision of these students was almost non-existent and many of these students ended up in court. As early as 1960 many districts began alternative schools, located separate from the host school, as a way to deal with the violence, weapons, and drugs found on elementary and secondary school campuses

(NCES, 2002). In 1994, Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act, which mandated that all local educational authorities create a policy that required a one year expulsion for any child who brings a firearm onto school property (Allen-Meares, 2007). Many school districts enacted “zero tolerance” policies in response to this act and have added other offenses such as possession of prescription drugs and striking an employee of the school district to this policy. These policies have also been found to be racially biased (Harvard Project, 2000).

For years warehousing the at-risk student away from the mainstream population with little thought to the socio-emotional or psychological barriers that led them to the alternative placement was the norm. One study (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001) explained the philosophy of alternative education in this way “For years, students have been literally “dumped” in alternative schools with little thought either to their return to traditional school or to the alternative program’s effectiveness.” Transitioning the alternative school student back into the regular classroom is also a concern. In a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, “74 percent of districts reported a policy that allowed all alternative education students to return to a regular school, 25 percent of districts allowed some, but not all students to return, and 1 percent allowed none to return” (NCES, 2002, p.21).

Solutions to Alternative Placement

Little empirical research has been conducted since alternative schools became the last resort for students with disciplinary issues and effective evidence based intervention methods are hard to determine with so little data. Still, the few studies conducted suggest that when social workers become a part of the intervention team in a long term capacity some success can be achieved at the alternative school level (Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001). Designing a new intervention policy for students faced with placement at an alternative school would therefore likely benefit from the expertise and guidance that a social worker can offer.

New Policy Statement for Alternative School Placement

Hamilton County will institute the following policy regarding placement of a student at the alternative school beginning with the 2008-09 School Year. This new policy will supplement but not replace the existing policy. All notification and appeals processes will remain in effect for all offenses with the exception of the first offenses listed below under *Informal Hearings*.

To carry out the new policy four social workers will be hired each having at least a BSW from an accredited university. They will report to the Director of Student Services who serves under the Superintendent.

Informal Hearings

Each middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12) in the Hamilton County School District will create an informal school court that will meet twice a month under the supervision of the school social worker assigned to the school and the juvenile court. The court will consist of one principal or his/her designee, the school social worker, a representative from the juvenile court, and five students. The students will serve for one month or two court sessions and can not serve more than once in a school year. Three of the five students will be randomly selected from the students currently enrolled at the regular school. The other two students will be students randomly selected from the alternative school.

The purpose of the informal hearings will be to prevent students with minor misconduct offenses from being held to alternative placement standards and to keep them in regular school placement.

All students referred to the informal school court will undergo at least thirty minutes of counseling by the school social worker to determine if outside social services are needed to prevent future incidents.

First Offenses and Consequences

1. All first offenses listed below will go through the informal school court process. The informal court may determine that the offense requires a higher level of discipline and may therefore hold the student to the standards in the Code of Conduct enacted by the Hamilton County Department of Education at which time the proceedings will stop and the student will be bound over to the school administrator or his/her designee. The informal court decisions are final and no appeal process is allowed at this level.
2. First offenses:
 - Dress code violations
 - Harassment
 - Cell phone/pager violations
 - Indecent language
 - Littering on campus
 - Tobacco use on school property
 - Disrespect to teachers/administrators

First offense consequences range from trash pickup, cafeteria cleaning, presenting a paper related to the offense, Saturday school, ten (10) documented volunteer hours and a formal written apology. All sentences must be carried out in the two week period following informal school court. If not in compliance, student will come before the court for a second time and one day of Saturday school will be added to the original sentence. If not in compliance after two appearances student will be bound over to the school administrator or his/her designee for further disciplinary measures which could include in-school or out of school suspension.

If the student commits a second offense of the items listed he/she will not come before the informal school court but will go directly to the school administrator or his/her designee for disciplinary measures as outlined in the Code of Acceptable Behavior and Discipline.

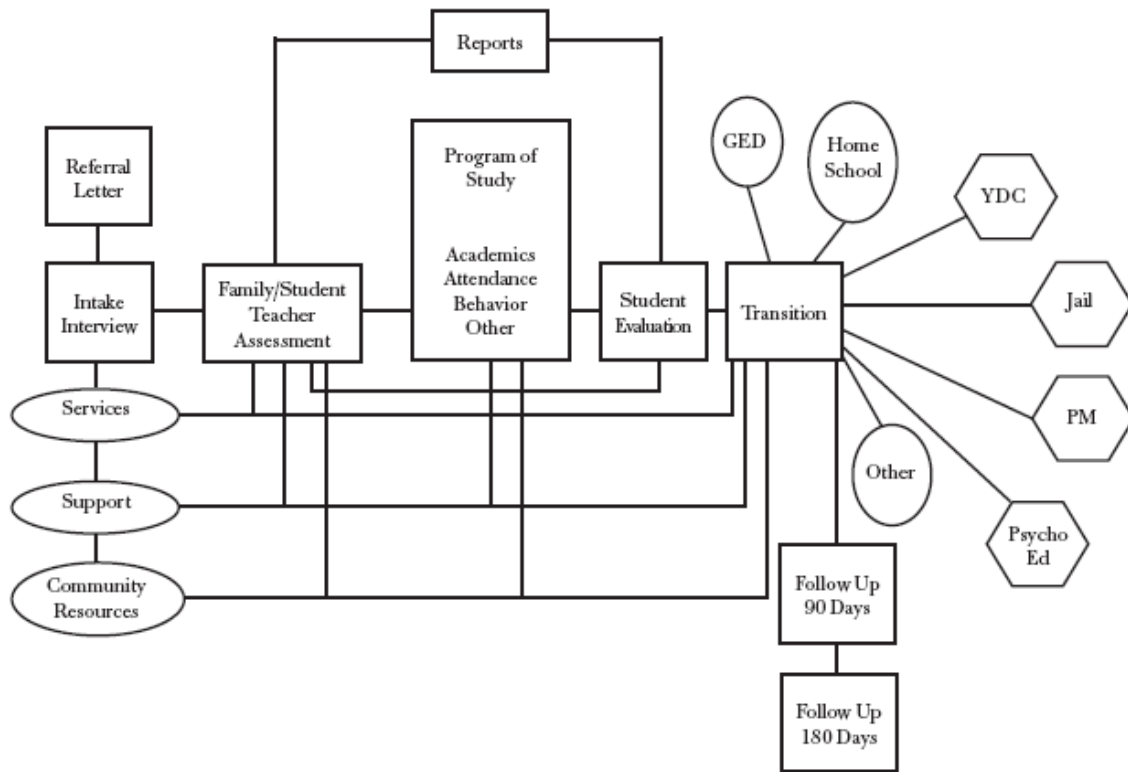
Formal hearings

If it is determined that the above informal measures do not alter the behavior then a formal hearing or M-Team (if the student is classified as Special Education) will be held at the regular school. This hearing will include the student, the parent/guardian, all teachers, the principal, and the school social worker. The outcome of this hearing will determine the type of discipline measures that are appropriate for the recurring offense and may include Saturday school, in-school and out of school suspension, and alternative school placement. The regular notification and appeals process is required from this point forward.

Alternative School Placement

If it is determined that the student requires alternative school placement the school social worker will then become the case manager for the student. Throughout the process the school social worker will be the liaison between the parent/guardian and the school. All school personnel must coordinate the student's behavioral and educational plan with the school social worker. The social worker will follow the Family-School-Community Collaboration Model *Table 1* (Carpenter-Aeby, 1999) that incorporates the psychosocial approach and systems theory. "Interventions, assessment, and ongoing evaluation were developed to contribute to the overall improvement of the client (student/family) and the effectiveness of the program, consistent with evidence-based practice" (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001).

Table 1. *The Family-School-Community Collaboration Model of Assessment and Intervention Development* (Carpenter-Aeby, 1999)



This model allows the school social worker to evaluate, develop, implement, and monitor the student through placement, transition back to regular school, and follow-up for up to one hundred-eighty (180) days after alternative school placement ends. The school social worker remains in direct contact with the student and his family throughout the process thereby creating a continuum of care that will ensure that the student has a successful educational experience. Involving the family in the process has been proven to be an “effective strategy for intervening with students at risk for psychosocial barriers and academic failure” (Aeby, Manning, Thyer, & Aeby, 1999, p.29).

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