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School discipline takes kinder turn

Provincially mandated new-look suspensions that stress prevention come into effect today

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Jacob Hunter is doing math and bored stiff.

Stuck in a basement room at his high school, the Grade 9 snowboarder can't chill with his friends, can't go out for lunch, can't do anything but school work all day, every day this week.

"It's punishment and it's really boring. But I'm getting caught up with my work, so that's good – I even finished something that's not due 'til Monday."

Hunter is suspended this week from Toronto's Northern Secondary School for breaking rules and disrupting class. But instead of watching TV at home for five days, he's still at school, separate but supervised, doing his work with a teacher nearby and talking with a youth counsellor – well, starting to – about why he gets into trouble.

This is the new look of school suspensions starting today across Ontario, as a kinder, gentler code of discipline that puts prevention before punishment kicks in for the province's 2 million students.

Forget Zero Tolerance. This is a new Ground Zero for tolerance.

While students still must be kicked out for having a weapon, selling drugs, stealing, sexual assault or a fight that sends someone to hospital – and may be suspended for bullying, swearing at a teacher, being drunk in class, vandalism or being found with drugs – no longer will they simply be cast adrift in hopes they'll snap out of it on their own.

Starting today, Queen's Park requires every student suspended for more than five days to be offered a program to help them keep up with school work and, if need be, counselling. Until now, this was not required, although some school boards ran programs for suspended students.

"Will it work? That's the million-dollar question – but if we can keep a kid engaged in school work while we help them figure out why they're having trouble, that's got to be better than kicking them out and letting it fester," says counsellor Dale Callender of Delisle Youth Services, who designed Northern's unusual program called Stop Gap.

Moreover, principals now must consider a string of "mitigating factors" before issuing a

suspension, from the student's history and age and possible special needs to whether the behaviour was provoked by harassment or how a suspension might disrupt their schooling.

In the past, principals were free to use their discretion based on these factors if they wished, but now they must.

"There will still be times when we'll have to tell a kid we can't put up with it any more – 'Go!' – but the principal has to consider, say, whether it's the first time a student has shown up under the influence or the 15th time he's arrived stoned and falling all over himself. There's always context," says Paul Crawford, superintendent of education for the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

"School safety still comes first, but generally you want to nip things in the bud before they get too far and help kids who need treatment for things like anger management," said Crawford, whose board has hired two new teachers and a social worker to provide programs for suspended students.

Ontario has earmarked \$43 million for school boards to hire new social workers, psychologists and youth workers for these alternative programs and has trained 11,000 principals and teachers in the new "positive discipline."

But with all the concern about safety in schools, is Ontario going soft on discipline?

"No – we still need consequences for certain behaviour, but harsh consequences should not be the first line of defence," said Education Minister Kathleen Wynne yesterday.

"At the end of the day, if you help a kid keep up with school work while they're out and give them some one-on-one attention and an incentive to come back and engage in school, that's what we want."

The Toronto District School Board is adding four new programs for suspended and expelled students, including a media course for expelled teenaged girls and a program in which expelled students work on a Habitat For Humanity construction site.

Northern's new pilot project offers suspended teens a free seven-day Outward Bound dogsledding expedition next month in Algonquin Park to help bolster their sense of identity and earn part of a physical education credit.

"People ask if we're rewarding kids for acting out, but if we don't get at the 'why' of their behaviour as well as giving them consequences, the problem just festers until the next time," says Callender, who notes the recent report on school safety by lawyer Julian Falconer called for more prevention programs and fewer suspensions.

"There're all sorts of reasons (why) kids get into trouble – family problems, depression, anxiety, trouble with school work," said Callender, "and we need to help kids, not wipe our hands of them."