

# Oceanside offers students alternative to home suspension

Students may attend full day at learning center rather than miss out on schoolwork

By **Gary Warth** 12:01 A.M. OCT. 5, 2014

Most students facing suspension in the Oceanside Unified School District aren't being sent home, but instead are continuing their schoolwork in a separate classroom and doing some self-reflection about why they're in trouble.

That option is possible through the district's Alternative to Suspension program, which started as a pilot program in February at three campuses and has since been expanded to all district middle and high schools.

"Let's say a kid has an issue with a teacher," said Barbara Perez, director of student services in Oceanside Unified. "They're gone from that teacher's class for five days, but they're here versus a home suspension where the kid's going to sleep, watch cartoons, eat Cocoa Puffs. They're here with us doing regular schoolwork that they turn in to their teacher."

Families are given the option of traditional home suspension, where Perez said students would miss out on schoolwork, or attending a full school day at district's Alternative Learning Center, which operates on the campus of Ocean Shores, the district's continuation high school.

Perez said parents have overwhelmingly opted for keeping their children at school rather than sending them home.

Students who are suspended for acts of violence aren't eligible to attend the learning center; it's open only to students whose suspension stemmed from other disruptive behaviors.

Those students and their parents declined to be interviewed for this story, citing privacy reasons.

The pilot program began at Lincoln Middle School, Oceanside High School and Ocean Shores High School, partly in response to state Assembly Bill 1729. The new law took effect in January 2013 and encourages school districts to provide alternative means of discipline besides suspensions and expulsions.

Perez said that the bill didn't specify what to put in place as an alternative discipline, however, leaving school districts unsure how to respond.

"A lot of school districts have said, 'We're not going to suspend kids,' but they haven't come up with a systematic way to have an alternative that's very positive to address behavior," Perez said.

Oceanside's program already has gotten the attention of other districts that see it as a possible model for addressing the new law, said Barry Tyler, administrator of the Alternative Learning Center.

"We're beginning to refer to it as the Alternative Learning Center model," Tyler said. Administrators from as far away as Standard School District in Bakersfield have visited Oceanside to see the program, he said.

From Feb. 10 until early June, 182 students in grades 6-12 participated in the program. Without it, Perez said, those students would have spent a combined 447 days and more than 2,220 instructional hours at home.

"Our goal is to nurture students, to provide a safe and comfortable learning environment and to put practices in place so when things of this nature come into play, we have a solution," Tyler said.

Besides doing their assigned school work at the Alternative Learning Center, Perez said, students meet with a teacher to do restorative practices, which are exercises to take responsibility for their behavior, make amends with people they've harmed and learn strategies to not re-offend.

Jim Shirley, a retired principal, works with the students at the center during the one to five days they spend out of class.

Rather than dwelling on what they did wrong or their punishment, Shirley said he talks to the students about the consequences of their actions.

“We’re looking at ‘What did you do and who was harmed by what you did,’ and making kids think,” he said, explaining how he tries to instill them with a sense of empathy.

Eventually the students learn they not only harmed someone in class, but also their family and even themselves, he said.

Students write essays about why they are in the center and what they can do differently at school. Looking ahead, he also asks them to find an adult at school they can turn to for help.

Sometimes students address their problems with other students while at the center, and together they work out their differences.

“I’ve had some high school kids who got into some knockdown fights, and they both were thrown in here,” Shirley said. “And you know what? By the end of five days, they’re sitting together.”

