Michelle M. Shearer

1. *What are the three biggest barriers to providing environments in schools that are safe and conducive to learning?*

- Overcrowding; class sizes in excess of 30 students per class
- More adults are needed to monitor students in non-classroom areas (hallways, bathrooms, parking lots, etc.). Teachers have their hands full with classroom instruction yet are frequently expected to monitor and supervise both their classrooms and additional areas.
- There is a great need to create a "culture of pride" in our schools, i.e. a sense of community in which students, parents, community members, teachers, etc. take pride in school maintenance and security and insist on learning environments where all are welcome and accepted. General school climate, cleanliness, lighting, security, surveillance cameras, sufficient staffing and personnel, etc. are all factors to consider.

2. *Do you think that suspension from school is warranted in certain cases? When should a student be suspended from school? For how long? Is two classroom weeks a reasonable maximum amount of time that a principal alone can decide to suspend a student?*

Let me begin by stating the obvious: Students need to be in school to learn. I can't teach chemistry to a student who isn't present in my classroom, and most students do not possess the degree of independence, self-discipline, and motivation required to direct their own learning when they are absent from school for whatever reason. Even if they find a way to teach themselves the content from the textbook or the Internet at home, they still miss out on the opportunities to collaborate and communicate with their peers and engage in creative problem solving and laboratory activities that they can only experience in the classroom. With that said...

Yes, suspension from school is warranted in cases where the safety of students, teachers, staff, and/or administrators is jeopardized. The more difficult question to answer is, "For how long?" because every day of school missed is instructional time lost, time that is virtually impossible to recapture. I'll use my class as an example: Students attend my chemistry class 90 minutes per day, and each day involves laboratory work, partner and group tasks, problem solving assignments, direct instruction, and other learning activities that cannot be performed alone at home. When students are suspended and their parents ask me to "send the work home," I'm often at a loss, because the work that needs to be done requires the student to be in the classroom.

A student who is suspended for five days from my class misses 450 minutes of learning activities that essentially can't be sent home and thus must somehow be "made up." It's never made sense to me that suspension is counted as an "excused absence" and thus suspended students have the right to make up all of the work missed for full credit. This creates tremendous hardship for a teacher and actually indirectly affects the non-suspended students. If suspended students have the right to make up all of the work for full credit, he or she needs to "keep up and catch up" and will require after school help. Labs will need to be set up again and supervised, and I'll have to reteach hours of content...as I also attempt to attend to the educational needs of 90 *non*-suspended students who deserve my time and attention.

If teachers are expected to make sure students "catch up" so that their grades are unaffected by the suspension, then a two week suspension is not "reasonable" in the sense that the student will miss an entire unit (and then some) of instruction in all of his or her classes. Essentially, the student gets a two week "vacation" and then walks back into the classroom with the right to say to his or her teachers, "What did I miss and how are you going to make sure I'm caught up?" I've been there.

3. *Can you identify any examples of student infractions of a non-violent nature (e.g. cheating on an exam, tardiness, etc.) which can result in student suspensions and due to their nature would make you feel unsafe or uncomfortable to have the suspended student/students readmitted to school pending the outcome of the appeal of the suspensions?*

The infractions cited above do not warrant suspension. First, we need to help our parents understand that they have the responsibility to be parents, that they are the most important people in their children's lives and have tremendous power to teach and model character traits such as honesty, punctuality, responsibility, etc. that are expected in school and the workplace. Second, as educators, we need to implement consequences that actually help students better themselves in these areas. For example, perhaps a student caught cheating on an exam forfeits the right to apply for honor societies and spends 10 hours teaching elementary school students about the consequences of poor decisions. Perhaps a student caught vandalizing school property spends a month after school for two hours per day helping custodians clean and maintain the school. Suspension doesn't "teach" desirable character traits. Often, suspension amounts to a "vacation day" and sometimes backfires in the sense that from a peer perspective, it's actually "cool" to be suspended for a day.

We need to continue to partner with parents and fund and implement character education programs. During my visits to China and Japan, I learned that parents and schools invest heavily in "moral education" and consider it a central part of the curriculum.

4. *Should there be a minimum standard of educational services provided to students expelled or placed on long term suspension? If you answer "yes," could you suggest the types of services and method of delivery to be provided? If you answer "no," please provide your reason(s).*

No. First, suspension as an "excused absence" creates the problems I discussed in my response to question number two. What is the power of suspension as a consequence if students know that they can return to school and say, "What did I miss?" knowing that the teacher is responsible for making sure they catch up so that their grade is unaffected by the suspension? How is this fair to the students who are present every day, working hard, following school rules and displaying exemplary character? I personally don't believe that suspended students should be allowed to make up work missed for full credit, nor do I believe that educational services should be provided to a student on long-term suspension or expelled.

I do believe in alternative, highly-structured schools and learning environments with very small classes that minimize social interaction and give students the opportunity to further their education in a setting where they do not disrupt the general school population. I have also seen an effective "ISS" (in-school suspension) program in which middle school students completed their academic work within their home school under strict supervision without social interaction. ISS programs require additional personnel and resources and can be logistically difficult to implement in large schools, but they do keep students in school and learning, which is the ultimate goal.

5. *Are you or is your organization aware of any other issues related to how student suspensions/expulsions are handled? If so, do you have any data which would shed light on the magnitude of this problem/issue?*

I do not have any specific information or data to formulate an answer to this question.