Grim Tales
of Boys & Girls Out Of School
Letter from the Editors

The stars twinkled as if to say, “Look at me! Look at me!” That line was part of a composition my daughter wrote in elementary school. I always loved the image but now consider it a metaphor for a child’s desire to be recognized. We all know the importance of sturdy self-esteem. Less acknowledged is the power of the regard of others – the power to smother or nourish.

I tell the following anecdote often because it so vividly illustrates what can happen when a student is acknowledged with respect, and it shows the exquisite awareness of how they are regarded. (It is no accident that young people react with outrage when ‘dissed’ – disrespected!)

Shaq had recently transferred from a disciplinary program to a mainstream school. When asked how his previous school had made a difference, he responded, “I had a counselor. She talked with me.”

I tried to get his thoughts on how to improve his new school’s environment and he shrugged. To the suggestion that a doable project might be to compare the resources of different high schools, he shook his head, “No, that wouldn’t work,” he argued. “They (school officials) would say the students at (the more elite schools), THEY deserve.” Unspoken: The kids at his school with less resources deserve less.

His observation, spoken so matter-of-factly, tears the heart. The students we are entrusted to care for soak up our support — or our disregard. The messages we send by ignoring, excluding and providing inadequate resources are heard loud and clear.

The stories in this little book are not exceptional. They tell of everyday life for too many. They tell of experiences where support was taken away, where resources vanished, where we stopped talking and listening.

Look at them. Listen. Because it is our choice. Smother or nourish.

- Ruth Zweifler, Board Member / Founder with Peri Stone-Palmquist, Executive Director

Special thanks to the National Economic & Social Rights Initiative, the Dignity in Schools Moratorium Support Fund, The Schott Foundation for Public Education and the Jackson Social Welfare Fund for providing the financial support to make this publication possible. To support the work of the Student Advocacy Center, please make a donation at www.studentadvocacycenter.org.

Image on the front used with permission from © Folk Art Papercuts by Suzy Taylor. Please check out her amazing artwork at http://www.etsy.com/shop/FolkArtPapercuts.

© Student Advocacy Center of Michigan, 2013
Get Out and Don’t Come Back

The following story was written by a student working closely with the Student Advocacy Center. He is a truly amazing kid with an incredible amount of potential to be both a leader and a model student. He is inquisitive, charismatic, genuine, and has an ever-increasing interest in marine biology. With the right supports in place, this student has proven to be someone who can take responsibility for his actions and overcome adversity. I have seen him work diligently to improve his academic standing despite consistent challenges. He is dear to my heart, and I look forward to seeing what he is able to accomplish in this new school year.

Were you excited for your first day of high school? I was. I spent all summer looking forward to start the first day of 9th grade. I was excited to see all my friends and to meet all sorts of new people. I thought school was going to be fun because it was my first time going to this particular school. But the first day became my worst day.

The principal stared at me when I first walked through the main doors. I saw her just mugging me, so I asked, “What are you looking at?”

“Don’t ask me what I’m looking at,” she said, and she told me to go to the office.

I went to her office where she wrote me up and sent me home for the rest of the day.

Throughout the year I was sent to the office about two or three times a week, I was put on out-of-school suspension about four times, they never let me get the work I missed while I was gone.

I was put on long term suspension when my friend’s phone got stolen. I got the blame for that even though I didn’t do it. They never gave me a disciplinary hearing. They just said I couldn’t come back for 45 days. Being out of school for so long wasn’t like a vacation or anything, because all my friends were still in school. I hated it. I couldn’t go anywhere, so I just stayed in the house.

Ms. Peri from the Student Advocacy Center helped me get back into school by asking for a hearing. We had a meeting with a bunch of teachers, the principal, and my mom. The meeting was about me changing my behavior. I told everyone that I would improve and that I learned my lesson, so they let me back into school.

When I came back, I did improve. My grades started going up and I was trying to focus more on getting things done, but the principal kept accusing me of stealing things. Around the end of the year there was another incident involving a can of pop and
a bag of Doritos that got taken from the teacher’s lounge and I got blamed for it. The principal told me she had me caught on camera, but would not show me the video. Then she told me, “One of the staff members saw you in there.” I said, “If you really seen me, why ya’ll just now saying something?” It was a whole week before they said anything to me about it, and plus I never, ever eat Doritos. Those are nasty and I don’t like them.

After she filled out all the paperwork she said, “I am trying to get you out of here. I know you don’t want to be here, so I’m trying to do you a favor.”

I felt shocked that my principal would say something like that to me. I never had a mean principal like that. I was put out of school for five days. When I came back, she put me in this little room with about 20 other kids. I don’t know why she put me in that room, but I felt like going crazy. I can’t be in small areas, and I kept getting in trouble for all sorts of things like going to the bathroom or getting a drink of water without asking.

During lunch one day, the teacher took us down to get our lunches, but I forgot to get a fork. The teacher said, “Come on, hurry up.” “I gotta grab a fork,” I said, but the teacher couldn’t wait two more seconds. He called the principal, who then came into the room and got me. She wrote me up and said, “You know what, get out and don’t come back.” There were only twelve days left.

I went back up to the school later to ask if I could take my exams and get some work, the principal said, “You’re not getting anything. You’re not going to do it anyway.” Then she told me to leave.

I don’t know what I would have done if I were the principal. I wouldn’t want that job. But I do think my principal should have asked more questions, investigated the situation, and learned my side of the story to find out what really happened instead of blaming me for things I didn’t do all the time.

Even though my high school experience last year was bad, I am still excited to start school this fall, to see my friends, and meet new people. I am going to a new high school with a fresh start, and I am looking forward to getting back on track and making up for everything that I missed last year.
A PARENT’S VOICE

School of Choice

Written by Jessica “Decky” Alexander, professor at Eastern Michigan University, based on an interview with Natalie, a SAC client whose middle school son, Javon, was expelled for persistent disobedience. This was performed at SAC’s storytelling event in June 2013.

It started in 6th grade, almost two years ago. He was disruptive, got expelled. It was nothing aggressive towards other students. More mouthin’ off, being insubordinate, not listening. Nothing physical ever. Just disruptive.

I tried to get him this IEP. Filled out the paperwork, before the school year, because I didn’t want any problems. I wanted change.

Well, the school says they didn’t get the paperwork on time and it sat there. And then the school year started and we didn’t have the IEP yet. And then he was denied. They said he was capable.

His regular pediatrician put him on some pills and it changed his whole behavior. He couldn’t get out his thoughts. I couldn’t see him.
So he started 6th grade with no IEP, just pills. He had a no-nonsense teacher - my older son had her, too. She is good. She is tough. But Javon says to her, “If I see you at Walmart I will punch you.” And Javon says later, ‘I know I shouldn’t have that said.’ But he is expelled for 120 days.

It’s not what he has done, it’s what they think he might do that gets Javon in trouble. They really wanted him out of the school. “He’s a disruption.”

Sometimes, they are making a big deal out of nothing. He gets in trouble for just joking in class. For passing gas, they expelled him. It’s unfair. There is a lot about school that is unfair.

In the 120 days he is not in school, he becomes a felon. He breaks into homes, cases the houses where he mowed lawns. He had a lucrative business. Mowing lawns. Yard work. And now instead of school, we are in court.

And after the 120 days is over, they will not let him back in school. Even after we appeal. No school in this county or the nearby county will take him.

School of choice is that they get to choose if they want you....

There is no alternative school for 6th graders. There is nothing. At 6th grade, my son is out of school and he has gotten into a lot of trouble, trouble that I can’t get him out of. So depressing.

Me? I don’t even want to get up out a bed. Getting up and seeing him not in school is even worse.

He is learning street stuff. He is learning to be a criminal. He is not learning to change the world with good. He is learning to change the world with bad.

He says, ‘I want to go back to school. I will do way better.’ But now there are these barriers on his record and they won’t let him in. You can’t be a kid and make kid mistakes, because they follow you. Get stamped on your record. Everyplace we go, his whole story goes. Whatever is on his record, transfers. He is his record.

He’s just a big kid. He wants to be a dog whisperer. Rescue dogs. He’s real good with them. We watch that Cesar Milan. He feels like ‘they are listening to him.’

We are going to try another district. I’m filling out the paperwork. If they let him in, he will be almost 14 in 6th grade. How do I catch up? Do I have him read books? It’s really confusing. I wish I just had more help. Period. I don’t know all my options and I’m a resourceful girl.

This whole No Child Left Behind ... We are fallin’ through the cracks.

Postscript:

Most recently, the home district said they would never reconsider their decision to deny reinstatement. And yet another school district denied his school of choice application.
A Slap In The Face

The story of a family that Student Advocacy Center tried to help.

A teacher slapped her and kept her job, but Janelle, a 13-year-old, was expelled from all public schools in the state for 180 days. No school has any obligation to reinstate her. Ever.

Janelle had a history of behavior challenges and a family history of mental illness. The referral slips in her file describe her as “insubordinate.” One time, a teacher asked Janelle to do 25 push-ups when she asked to use the restroom. When she objected, an argument ensued and she was sent to in-school suspension. School was not a place where she experienced success.

On the day of the incident that led to the “mandatory” expulsion, Janelle was in the computer lab, standing near the closed door to the classroom. The teacher tried to enter the room but had difficulty getting the door open. An argument ensued and 16 student witnesses said the teacher slapped Janelle. The teacher said she raised her hand to slap the student but then withdrew it, accidentally grazing her cheek. Slapping is considered corporal punishment, which is prohibited, according to Michigan Compiled Laws (MCL) 380.1312.

Some students reported that Janelle touched the teacher back, although to what degree varies depending on the student. The teacher said she had been punched in her throat. Janelle says she stormed out of the room swearing, and never touched the teacher.

According to MCL 380.1310, a physical assault to an employee is a mandatory permanent expulsion. This is defined as the act of intentionally causing or attempting to cause physical harm to another through force or violence. The school board voted to permanently expel Janelle.

Janelle’s mother tried to enroll her in a virtual school, per the advice of a school board member but was told there were no spots available unless she wanted to enroll in the tuition-based program. Janelle’s mother works but her income is extremely low.

Janelle spent the rest of the school year out of school.
I’ve been out of school for seven months and even though I didn’t love school before, I miss parts of it. I’m worried about my future. Let me tell you about the day I got kicked out.

I was in a bit of a hurry. I woke up late for the bus and had to brush my teeth, dress, eat, and make my lunch in about half the time I normally would. I dressed myself, brushed, had a bagel and made my lunch. My lunch consisted of a PB and J, tortilla chips and cheese, water, and an apple. There was a small paring knife on the counter left out from the night before. The knife had a green handle and the set it comes in has polka dots on the handle. It’s used for kitchen stuff. I grabbed it without really thinking. I wanted to peel the apple. I don’t like eating the skin of the apple. I chew it and chew it and then I usually have to find a trash can to spit it out. I can’t make myself swallow it. It’s like chewing on a leaf. So, I brought the knife to school so I could peel the apple.

I’ve never associated a little kitchen knife with a weapon. It’s a tool for the kitchen. I wasn’t thinking of it as a weapon. I was more thinking, oh my god, I’m going to be late for the bus. I’ve got to go.

I peeled my apple and ate it without incident before first hour in the cafeteria. At second hour, the teacher said that we had 5 minutes to study our packet (which I didn’t do) and then the test would start. I hadn’t studied, so I knew I would most likely bomb the test but I should probably try, right? As I was writing my name, the pencil broke. I didn’t have a handheld sharpener and the one at the front of the class was a complete hunk of junk. One of the screws on the left side was loose and when you used it, it didn’t do a good job and it made this terrible rusty squeaking noise. I don’t like having a lot attention on me at all. Violating the silence of a room full of completely silent nervous students would not do me any favors. I remembered I still had my knife and realized I could sharpen it with that.

At the time, I felt quite proud of myself for having thought of this. Now - considerably less so.

I took out my pencil and the knife (it had a bright green handle and a pointy edge. It was not serrated.) I started to sharpen the pencil. Around half a minute after I started, the teacher noticed. She came over and asked me what I had under the desk. I showed her the knife and the pencil. She asked me if I would hand it over, so I did. She started to walk away and I said, wait- take this- and handed her the knife guard. I told her it was for my lunch. She went back to her phone, called the office and said, “A
student has a knife.” They came down and took me to the office. A very nice police officer explained the trouble I was in and asked if I had any other ‘weapons’; I said that I had a scissors and toenail clippers, which she took and gave back later. My mom picked me up and a hearing to determine my punishment was scheduled.

My mom, dad, and SAC advocate came to the hearing. I was very nervous. I felt like I did something stupid but I didn’t feel like I did something untrustworthy. It was not malicious. Everyone said it was very serious. But I remember the principal saying that she didn’t think I was a threat or a danger. They still suspended me. I felt like due to the nervousness and panic over the school shootings, they were throwing one student under the bus on the off chance that if I did snap, they wouldn’t be accused of being lazy or incompetent. It didn’t cost them anything to be safe. In this case, being safe was suspending me. I was suspended for a year because I like apples.
So what happened to me? I started meeting with my homebound teacher, who would meet with me 2 or 3 or so hours a week to do some work. I still can’t believe that they actually think 1 or 2 hours of one-on-one teaching is a valid substitute for 35 hours of schooling. It took me months to get a teacher to work with me on math. Months.

I’ve done work that I won’t get credit for because someone didn’t send an email. Homebound teachers and the school are not talking to each other. I get the feeling that they don’t care. Not that they are forgetful. But that they don’t care.

I didn’t love school before. The work felt like busy work. In some classes, I just read books.

You know, I just reassembled and painted a nerf gun for a kid because I thought it was interesting, but you ask me to write three to five sentences about how my summer was? Three it is. I would go for the minimum consistently. I was lazy.

But now I’ve been out of school seven months. I miss my friends. I miss the cheesy breadsticks. Those were magical. I miss wrestling. I miss my German teacher.

I would never intentionally hurt someone. And I’d never do this again.

This summer, I’m going out of town with my family. I’m hoping I can come back to school next year, but not my old school. Screw that school. I want to get my life on track. I know I’ll have to buckle down.

I don’t really eat apples anymore, but I definitely don’t want that apple to determine my future.
Disturbing the Peace

Kris Keranen, an advocate with Michigan Protection and Advocacy Services, tells us about a 10-year-old who is kicked out of school repeatedly for disability-related behavior and eventually faces delinquency charges.

Jon is 10 years old now. He has had ADHD and a Mood Disorder as long as he and his mom can remember. He takes medication, which helps him a bit and sees a therapist at the local community mental health, which also helps.

In September of 2012, when Jon was 9 years old, his apartment burned down and his two pets, a dog and puppy, were killed in the fire. The police thought that Jon had started the fire, because it started in his bedroom. They questioned him and accused him of lying when he said he didn’t do anything to start the fire. When the fire marshal investigated, he determined that the fire had been caused by old, faulty wiring in the apartment building, which happened to ignite in the outlet in Jon’s room. The police apologized to Jon and his mom, but Jon felt that the police hadn’t been fair, and he should be careful not to trust them again.

After losing their home in October, Jon and his mom moved to a new town nearby, and Jon waited to go to the new school. His mom went to the school first, to let them know more about Jon before he started. She let the school staff know about his disabilities, and that he was in the process of being tested for special education at his old school. The new school said that he wouldn’t be allowed to start coming to school until his mom brought in a paper copy of his birth certificate. Jon’s mom let the school know that it had been lost in the fire, but the school said that she would need to get a new one before he would be allowed to start the fourth grade. Jon wasn’t permitted to attend in the new district until early in December.

Jon has always had lots of trouble changing from one thing to another, like moving from recess back to the quiet of a classroom. His emotions are up and down, and he has difficulty controlling them. He struggles with paying attention, and often blurts things out without thinking first. Because he has missed so much school, he reports that reading is “hard,” and he feels bad when he gets a paper or test that he hasn’t done well on. Jon has felt bad in school a lot of the time.

Jon had all of these same troubles in his new school. Jon was frequently sent to the office for being disruptive and difficult in class. Once he was sent to the office, it was usually just a matter
of time before his mom was called at work to come and pick him up for the rest of the day — and sometimes, the next day, too. Jon was sent home between 16 and 25 days from when he started in December 2012 to the end of May 2013. The school recorded most of this time as “absent,” so it is hard to tell exactly how many days he was suspended. Missing that much school made it even harder for Jon to do the schoolwork that was expected of fourth graders.

Jon’s mom felt more and more frustrated about Jon’s lack of appropriate educational programming. She lost a job, one of the two she held to support her family, because she had to leave work to go to the school and pick up Jon so many times. But it wasn’t only the income she worried about. She worried that if Jon didn’t get more help in school soon, he would never finish school with a diploma. She worried about his future.

In April, Jon’s mom got information about advocacy services available. The advocate she contacted helped her understand special education laws and rules. Jon was finally evaluated for special education, found eligible as a student with an emotional impairment and, on June 4, 2013, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) was
written. This sounds like a happy ending, right?
Wrong. On May 30, 2013, intermediate school district staff members observed a teacher treat Jon in a manner that made them feel they must report the incident to Child Protective Services. The police wanted to interview Jon about what happened, and the next day the school liaison officer met with Jon at the school.

Jon doesn't trust the police. He thinks they are unfair, don't believe him when he tells the truth, and want to prove he did something wrong. The interview didn't go well. Jon shouted, and pushed tables and desks, spilling food in the process. He didn't get suspended though. In fact, the school didn't even tell his mom about Jon's behavior during the interview. Until later — two months later, to be exact.

On July 19, 2013, the advocate working with Jon and his mom filed a special education complaint on his behalf. Jon's mom was concerned that the school had waited so long to evaluate Jon — and that they still didn't understand his disabilities. Jon's IEP didn’t include any positive behavior supports. It didn’t include any of the supports and accommodations recommended in the evaluations. It didn't address any of his academic deficits. Jon's mom was concerned that nothing would change for Jon. She was also concerned that other kids like Jon would not get the support they needed either.

On July 25, 2013 — four business days after the school received a copy of the complaint — the county prosecutor approved a petition for delinquency proceedings. There was only one charge: “Disturbing the Peace.” The charge was for making “a disturbance in a public building,” the school. The petition stated that, based on the report of the acting principal, Jon, age 10, was “yelling, pushing tables, throwing chairs and spilling food and milk on the floor while at school on 5-31-13.”

At age 10, Jon, a child who has already had more than his share of difficulties in life is now court-involved because the school has criminalized his disability-related behavior.

Jon's mom and the advocate will continue to work on Jon's behalf, but how will they convince school and police authorities that everyone, not just Jon, must act responsibly?
Detention Over Spilled Milk

In Ms. Smith’s class, expectations are high but Callie rarely broke the rules. She was struggling but maintaining a C. One day, Callie listened to her teacher help others complete their assignment. Ms. Smith told her to start working. But Callie needed help, too. After class, she handed Callie a "thinking sheet" — a form used at her high school for students to address their own misbehavior. Ms. Smith felt that Callie had disobeyed her.

It all came to a head over spilled milk when, the next day, Callie spilled some on herself at lunchtime and called her mother to bring a change of clothes. After she changed, mom walked Callie back to class. The teacher confronted Callie, saying: "I hope it was worth it. You're serving detention." Ms. Jones defended her daughter. The teacher made some personal remarks about manners. The argument escalated. Ms. Jones left, embarrassed. Ms. Smith filed a behavior report claiming that Callie had been insubordinate, and that Ms. Jones had threatened her.

The following day, Ms. Smith sent her to the principal’s office; Callie hadn't filled out the "thinking sheet." The principal walked her to class, but “No admission” — not until the "thinking sheet" was completed. When she did so, Ms. Smith declared it ‘unacceptable.’ Callie never had a chance to explain her side of the story and refused to change her responses. For a week Ms. Smith continued to bar her from the classroom. Callie’s grade went from a C to an E.

Frustrated, Ms. Jones called the Student Advocacy Center. She felt that the teacher’s behavior had irreparably damaged Callie’s relation with the high school and the only solution was to move.

At a meeting with the school, SAC and the parent advocated that Callie be placed in a different class of the same subject to keep her from going back to Ms. Smith's class. We asked that she be helped with the work she missed and that the incident be expunged from her records.

Two days later, we heard from Ms. Jones. Callie had been moved to another class, the incident report had been taken off her records, and Callie was staying at her high school for the rest of the year. She would be able to stay with her friends and complete the first year’s credit.

While there’s no use crying over spilled milk, it surely helps to figure out what happened and how to manage better next time.
Severing Trust

The following story was told to SAC by a mother whose son was expelled in 2012.

Wyatt had never been in trouble before and earned his way into an esteemed magnet school, but none of that seemed to matter at his disciplinary hearing. The 12-year-old was expelled for 180 days and spent more than an entire school year getting homeschooled after a bus driver saw him playing mindlessly in the dirt at a transfer bus stop with a knife he had found in an alley near his home.

The State Board of Education has asked school districts to look carefully at the exceptions to mandatory expulsion outlined in the law to prevent unnecessary school exclusions. This includes looking at the student's intent. But rather than take Wyatt’s word — that he had no intention to use the knife as a weapon — the family says the principal kept badgering him to get the answer he seemed to want. “They had a look like they already felt he was guilty,” said Wyatt’s mom, Audrey.

Wyatt explained he didn’t have a beef with anyone. He hadn’t threatened anyone with the knife. No one knew he had it. His friend’s dad, a professor of psychology, testified at the disciplinary hearing that Wyatt was not a danger and had no intent to use the knife.

The disciplinary panel decided to expel him for 180 days, meaning the end of his 7th grade year and entire 8th grade year ended up happening at home. They even threw away the homework he had been completing and said he couldn’t earn any additional credit after the expulsion. “My son won’t talk about it, but he was really upset,” Audrey said. “He wants to go back there and doesn’t understand why he can’t.”

At the hearing, the principal told the family that Wyatt would never be permitted back in their school, but the mother said the relationship has been so deeply severed, the trust so broken, she would never want her son to go back there.
“They make it tough on kids,” she said. “They complain about dropouts, but they do a lot to make kids drop out.”

Postscript: As a result of the family’s continued advocacy, the school district has agreed to change its policy for the upcoming school year. The district has committed to more carefully considering the exceptions to zero tolerance provided in the Michigan’s school statute.

AN ADVOCATE’S VOICE

Deserted

Student Advocacy Center supported a family living outside our direct service area as they grappled with expulsion and the horrific impact that had on the family. Samantha Struppa, BSW intern at the time, wrote up the family’s devastating story.

Mike, an 8th grade student in a Michigan school district, was expelled in December for possession of an airsoft gun, which is a nonlethal replica firearm that shoots plastic pellets. A friend had given it to him and he wasn’t sure what to do. Finally, because he was scared of getting into trouble he threw it into the garbage.

Although he had no intention of using the object as a weapon and didn’t use it as a weapon, he was expelled for 180 days, with no education provided. His step-mom called the school for advice. The principal suggested that Mike live with another family member in a different district and try to enroll in that district. This was not a feasible option, as any parent would imagine. Driving somewhere also wasn’t feasible for this low-income family.

Recently, Mike’s father committed suicide, partially due to the stress of the expulsion. This family has suffered so much loss and Mike’s step-mother is trying to provide him with stability. This has been challenging without the support of the local schools.

This family feels deserted.
A Student’s Perspective

Senior Year Expulsion

A senior in high school was expelled for 180 days in her senior year and she could find no school to let her in. She was expelled for a fight, where she was viciously attacked. State law does not mandate expulsion for fighting. The student had already been accepted to college, but that dream was slipping away until she called SAC. At her original expulsion hearing, the student was too distraught to tell her side of the story, but her testimony at the appeal hearing was powerful:

I just want to thank you all for letting me have this second meeting. During the first meeting I was just so nervous and couldn’t get anything out that I wanted to say. First, I want to take you back to about two years ago. I was harassed by three girls. This included by text, in school, and on Facebook. It got so serious that once there was a text mentioning there would be a gun if I didn’t stop talking to a boy. I took it to the school, and even the cops. This is the only problem I’ve ever had with people at school.

Now, here we are, two years later and almost the same thing is happening. I knew Michelle because of Diana and Edward. Diana and Edward previously dated, and then broke up, so now Edward and Michelle are together. She has harassed Diana and me both on Facebook, and in person, up until the day even before this fight. She has called us sluts, and other horrific names such as that. I’ve told her on Facebook to stop, and I have ignored her before. But the day of the fight, I didn’t even think there would be a fight. I was walking with some friends and all of a sudden I saw Edward pushing Diana and Devin.

I was in an abusive relationship for nine months, that I just got out of, so I really think that brought up bad memories. I walked up to him to tell him to stop. Then his response was to push me. His girlfriend, Michelle, was calling all three of us girls mean names throughout this whole thing. She was walking away, still calling us names. So I decided to try to confront her. I wanted her to stop. I was yelling out her name as she kept going. I then grabbed her by the hair. All I wanted to do was make her turn around. I should have just touched her shoulder to make her turn around, or in a better case, not touch her at all. When I had her hair, I could then feel that Edward had mine. Edward and Michelle were attacking me, as I was fighting back. A friend then jumped in. She wanted to help break up the fight. Then Diana pulled Edward off of me.

The outcome of this fight for me was my piercings were ripped out and tugged on terribly, which left a lot of damage. For Michelle, I did bite her. However, I truly believe that
Michelle was trying to punch me in the mouth, which caused that. Or, in the mix of the fight, her hands were just by my mouth.

If I could take it back, I would, in a heartbeat. I know for a fact this will never happen again. I'm so sorry that I did any of this. If I could take it back, I would go get a teacher, or security guard or the principal. I would never even have walked with my friends that day. I would have
walked by myself to my third hour class. Over this month of no school, it has made me reflect on a lot of things, and made me appreciate school a lot more. I've always loved school. I've been a part of this school district my whole life. That's where I started and that's where I want to finish, with my class. The class I have known almost my whole life. It has made me realize how much I will do to get back into school. I'll do community service, I'll do credit recovery, I'll do summer school, and I plan on staying after every day with my teachers to get extra help, and I know my friends will help me out too. I'll even take counseling. I want to do whatever it takes. Everyone wants to see me graduate. Most importantly, I do too. I want to one day be able to say sorry to Michelle. Either via letter, or in person.

I love going to school. Always have. I have good grades. They are the best I’ve had in awhile. I always got help when I needed it. Even if you look at my past disciplinary record, you will see that I’m not a threat to the school. I've never been in a fight; I'm not a violent person. I've basically only been in trouble with cell phones and tardies, which shows I’m not going to fight again. I want to be able to go to school. It’s a true passion of mine.

I want to graduate and complete my dreams. I want to live on campus, while keeping my job, and graduating to become a nurse. I know I can do it. I've set my heart and soul on it and I will do what it takes to reach that goal.

I realize how serious this really is. And I'm willing to do whatever it takes to be able to come back and finish my education. I want to finish from my home high school. I want it so much. Like I said, I'll do community service, or Saturday Schools to make up time, I'm willing to do whatever it takes. I'm truly sorry about this fight. And I hope you give me a second chance.

Postscript: The student’s expulsion was overturned and she was given an alternative placement in an online program. She finished the work faster than any other student before. She graduated on time and was excited to start college.

---

Special thanks to the All Kids In School Coalition, particularly Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service, the ACLU of Michigan and the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency for supporting this project. Special thanks also go to SAC staff who helped write, edit and take photos, including Kathleen Kosobud, Ruth Salles, Elizabeth Bowker and intern Julia Cohen.
Michigan parents, youth, advocates and agencies are calling for more sensible school discipline policies that will truly promote academic achievement, lifelong learning and safe schools. We hope you will endorse our Solutions Not Suspensions Pledge for so many reasons:

1) **Michigan schools suspend and expel students in large numbers.** Michigan ranks 5th in the country for highest rates of student suspensions, with students of color, students with disabilities, and students in foster care suspended at significantly higher rates.

2) **Alternative solutions work.** Research has shown that the most effective approaches to decreasing school violence are social skills training, academic restructuring, and behavioral interventions. Implementing positive, evidence-based school discipline practices, such as School-wide Positive Behavior Support and Restorative Justice, increases academic success and decreases office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions.

3) **Punishment doesn’t work.** Research has shown that punishing problem behavior is associated with increases in aggression, vandalism, truancy, and dropping out, as well as lower school achievement scores.

4) **Punishment makes communities more dangerous.** Both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that students with out-of-school suspensions and expulsions are more likely to commit crimes.

5) **Every dropout costs society an estimated $250,000 over the student’s lifetime in lost income.** Research shows that students who are expelled are more likely to drop out of school and/or get arrested.

Please join us by endorsing the Solutions Not Suspensions Pledge calling for an end to non-mandatory school expulsions in Michigan.

The Pledge: http://tinyurl.com/solpledge
Sign here: http://tinyurl.com/signsolpledge
Endorsers: http://tinyurl.com/solendorsers