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Suspension seen as a slap on the wrist

Board members criticize punishment

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Sentencing a student to weeks in front of a television without parental supervision is no punishment, asserted Staten Island Community School Board members who took issue with the use of out-of-school suspensions as a means of discipline.

Board members sharply criticized a draft of the discipline code at a discussion meeting in Paulo Intermediate School, Huguenot. The code permits 30-day suspensions of elementary and intermediate school children but does not require that offenders be educated at alternative sites.

Stressing that suspensions are a last resort, Schools Superintendent Louis DeSario said the district does not have the resources to transport children to other schools and provide alternative instruction. However, home instruction will be provided to children who are kept home "beyond a couple of weeks."

"But even three days in front of a television is not any punishment. You are rewarding them for bad behavior," said Board member Jane Tardell, who vowed to vote against the plan unless alternative sites were included.

Board members Denise Pedro, Betty Martinucci and Jerry Cammarata also said alternative educational sites should be found.

"What is the parent's responsibility?" asked Olivia Brennan, the board chairwoman. "What is a parent willing to do to change the behavior of the child?"

The new discipline code also includes an expanded definition of bias offenses and stricter penalties for sexual harassment.

Both offenses may be punished by a superintendent's suspension, which ranges from six to 30 days. The offenses must be punished by at least a reprimand or a parent conference.

Selling or distributing drugs, using or possessing weapons,

committing arson or causing riots must be punished by a superintendent's suspension. Criminal charges may also be initiated, according to the draft.

At the public hearing that preceded the meeting, a Tottenville graduate applauded the draft's inclusion of slurs against sexual orientation.

"I am gay and I grew up on Staten Island and am extremely pleased that it has been introduced. I hope this language survives," said Erik Helman. "But the emphasis should be on education instead of condemnation."

Sandra Barbry, parent-coordinator for the Clifton-based African American Parent Council, said the plan lacked proposals for prevention.

Pat Talaszek, the district representative of the United Federation of Teachers, said all students should be informed of the infractions and punishments ahead of time.

Saying that the Board of Education has no policy or definition of sexual harassment, board member Lillian Popp complained that school administrators are forced to interpret allegations.

Ms. Martinucci said suspensions were too harsh for sexual harassment, slurs against ethnicity and sexual orientation. Those infractions, she said, should be met with sessions with guidance counselors or lessons in multiculturalism.

Suspensions should be reserved for physically violent crimes, she said.

Each school will design its own discipline code based on the code the board adopts, DeSario said.

The board will continue discussion on the discipline code Monday at 7 p.m. at PS 3, Pleasant Plains. A board meeting will follow the discussion at 8 p.m. in the auditorium, where the code will probably be voted upon.