

Alternative Suspension Program offered for suspended, expelled West Ottawa students

AmeriCorps member Lacey Lipan helps out Isaiah Salinas, left, and Cameron Kinkosanvong, during a program through Neighbors Plus called Alternative Suspension Program, where middle school kids who are suspended or expelled from West Ottawa can go for alternative learning during the school day.

Photo by Dennis R.J. Geppert/Sentinel staff



By LISA ERMAK [The Holland Sentinel](#) Posted Nov 16, 2011 @ 10:21 PM

When an adolescent is suspended or expelled from school, sitting at home can cause more problems than solutions, said Sherrie Kornoelje Santos, executive director of Neighbors Plus, a Christian community development organization.

Often the kids, particularly the ones who are expelled, tend to come from families where there's nobody home during the day or some of them come from single-parent households, she said.

"In that case, what's a middle schooler going to do home alone for a week? None of it's productive."

Knowing that was the case, about five years ago Neighbors Plus created the Alternative Suspension Program, which provides a safe and educational environment for West Ottawa's sixth- through ninth-grade students who are serving their out-of-school suspension or expulsion time.

The program, which is housed in Harderwyk Ministries' Anchor building, is free and voluntary, but parents must be the ones to enroll their child.

The goal is to keep the students up with their school work and focused on making behavioral changes.

"What we found is high school students have often already made their choices. They've decided to hang in there until they can just drop out. A middle school student has more of a chance to make changes," said Karen DeMaagd, coordinator of the program.

Currently there are three students in the program, all of whom are on track to re-enter school for second semester, which starts in January.

"A lot of people think this is a school with a bunch of bad kids. It's not. It's a school with a bunch of kids who just made bad decisions," said Isaiah Salinas, a suspended seventh-grader.

Salinas said since being a part of the program, he has been able to significantly improve his math skills and get more individualized attention.

Since the program doesn't accept more than six students at a time, the four-person staff — including two AmeriCorps members — can focus on helping the students change their behavior and focus on success in the classroom.

"The reasons for a lot of the suspensions are behavior or classroom disruption," DeMaagd said. "Some of them, the state of Michigan mandates, like bringing a knife to school. But we don't dwell on their action. We dwell on ways to change their behavior."

Ninth-grader James Harris and sixth-grader Cameron Kinkosanvong said they both enjoy the academic structure, because it helps to keep them on track with their studies.

"I like it because they help you keep up and when you go back to regular school you're not like, 'Wow, when did I learn that?'" Harris said.

All three boys have developed a friendship from being the program together for the past few months.

"I love my little Cam. He is much more mature than I would expect from someone his age," Harris said.

"We're all sailing in the same boat," Salinas said.

Besides spending time on school work, the students take trips to local businesses to explore different careers, take part in community service projects and do clerical work at Harderwyk.

The West Ottawa Board of Education will recognize Neighbors Plus and their work with the Alternative Suspension Program during its Nov. 21 board meeting at the administration building, 1136 136th Ave.

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