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### Suspension reduction program touted

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DURHAM -- An advocate for discipline reform hopes he soon will be able to launch a novel program to reduce suspensions in two middle schools.

Mark **Trustin** is one of the driving forces behind the Student Suspension Alternative Project.

"The reason I'm excited about it and have been for three years trying to get this up and running is that for Durham Public Schools to try it means that they are willing to consider a totally different alternative or different approach to behavior in school, managing behavior in school," said **Trustin**, a school law attorney and a member of the City-County Violence Prevention Committee. "By that I mean, instead of a student meeting criteria for suspension and therefore being suspended, the idea is to analyze the subject misbehavior on the basis of whether it's so dangerous or disruptive that the rest of the school population would be [affected]."

Grace Marsh leads the Elna B. Spaulding Conflict Resolution Center, formerly known as the Durham Mediation Center. She is working with **Trustin** to launch the suspension alternative project.

"There is behavior that warrants expulsion and even prosecution," she said. "However, most of the behavior that we see that kids get suspended for, there's another way to deal with it."

The suspension alternative project, which **Trustin** and Marsh have received provisional approval to implement at Githens and Neal middle schools, will identify students with a pattern of misbehavior, have them craft and sign an agreement on his or her future behavior and work to help the student adhere to that code of conduct.

Creating the agreement and addressing problems will occur with the student working alongside a team that includes parents, teachers and, when appropriate, social workers and other support staff.

"You're being proactive and working with them up front," Marsh said, referring to the creation of the behavior agreement. "And then you have a support team around them so

that if they fall off the wagon, they come to that support team for you all to talk about what happened, why did you fall off the wagon, and what are you going to do to correct this?"

Each student will also be assigned a mentor to meet with weekly.

The approach is similar to that of truancy courts in some Durham schools, but the suspension alternative project will offer more support, Marsh said. It will also deal with students whose issues do not include truancy or chronic tardiness.

Minnie Forte-Brown, the school board chairwoman, was not familiar with the fledgling project. But she liked hearing that students will commit to good behavior as part of the program.

"I think that is an excellent strategy, because they have to have some responsibility," Forte-Brown said.

Several aspects of the initiative have yet to be finalized. The project is being reviewed by the Durham public school system, which declined to make an official available for comment for this story.

Marsh and **Trustin** are optimistic about receiving final approval. But they still must work out the exact nature of the involvement of district staff, which may require overtime pay; whether the program coordinator will be paid through a grant that has yet to be secured or whether the coordinator will be a volunteer graduate student studying juvenile justice issues; and how to measure the program's results.

Duke researchers have expressed an interest in studying the program, **Trustin** said. That will require having a control group that does not receive the same level of services.

**Trustin** said this program is novel because it is the only one he has been able to learn of in the state that is aimed at preventing suspensions rather than implementing alternative punishments after a student has gotten into trouble.