

Periods and punishment

Recent cases raise questions about in-school suspension

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Across AISD, only seniors are allowed off campus during lunchtime. According to assistant principal Tamara Stone, leaving campus poses a safety concern and the punishment is usually in-school suspension. The goal is no more underclassmen flocking off-campus to McDonald's during lunch. No more students "retiring early" and replacing their last period with a trip to Amy's.

And apparently, no more getting tampons. Or a fresh change of clothes.

After bleeding through her shorts at school one morning, sophomore Isaiah Trevino asked her boyfriend to drive to her house five minutes away so that she could change before third period. As Trevino pulled out of the parking lot at the beginning of lunch and made eye contact with Stone, she recalled feeling uneasy.

"We kinda got the feeling it was going to happen," Trevino said. "We felt like she [Ms. Stone] already knew who we were, so as soon as she saw us, she would just send us to ISS. I was panicking and worried because I thought my reason [for leaving campus] was valid."

Trevino's premonition proved to be correct. At the beginning of third period, security guard Bob Bedard pulled Trevino out of class and announced that she and her boyfriend were being sent to ISS for the rest of the day.

Like other students facing disciplinary action, Trevino had the chance to justify her actions during a due process conversation with Stone. After their meeting, Trevino said the original punishment stood.

Stone and other McCallum administrators interviewed by The Shield couldn't speak specifically about Trevino's situation due to privacy concerns. Stone said in general that parental permission, or lack thereof, may be a deciding factor in whether a student is punished for leaving campus. Trevino said she did not receive parental permission

beforehand. She also expressed frustration about the conversation.

"It kind of seemed like she didn't care," Trevino said. "Even when she called my dad, she said to him 'I'm assuming their story isn't real, they are making this up,' and my dad said 'No, they were at the house for this reason.'"

In general, Stone explained that if a student needs period products or a change of clothing during the school day, instead of leaving campus, the student should come directly to the administration.

"My recommendation is, if you bleed through your pants or something, come to a teacher or come to the office," Stone said. "We often help people get what they need. There's definitely menstrual products on campus, and we'll often find some item that they can wear. There's definitely things that can be done other than going home."

Stone noted that some students who have bled through their clothing have wrapped sweatshirts around their waists as an alternative to going home. If a student feels uncomfortable sitting in their own blood or wearing old gym clothes, calling parents may also be an option. If a parent cannot deliver the period products or fresh change of clothes, students who can drive may be granted permission to leave campus themselves.

For students who need period products, Stone recommended reaching out to friends, looking for period products provided by the McCallum Feminist Club, which are stocked in female bathrooms across campus, or talking to a trusted adult. Teachers, however, do not have the authority to allow students to leave campus to get period products or clean clothes; if a student wants to leave, they must talk directly to an administrator.

Sometimes, though, period products aren't readily available, said junior Leah Gordon, who recently had an experience similar to Trevino's. After looking through her backpack and almost all the bathrooms for tampons, Gordon didn't know what else she could do to help sophomore Cecilia Passos, who'd just started her period at school. Feeling like there were no other options, the two girls decided to go to H-E-B during lunch to purchase period products.

"We went to H-E-B, got the supplies and parked in the same place," Gordon said. "We were about to go to the bathrooms when Ms. Stone

came up to our car and knocked on our window."

During the subsequent due-process conversation, Gordon said that Stone told her that tampons were available in the library, which Gordon said she and Passos weren't aware of, and in bathrooms, which they had already checked. According to Gordon, Stone told her that the two could have gone to the office and asked for permission to leave campus.

Gordon said she didn't feel like there was time to go to the office first. She also highlighted that many students are unaware of the availability of period products in the library and said that had she known they were there, she would have gone.

Up until a recent interview with The Shield, librarian Jane Orr didn't think to promote that period products were available in the library.

"I never thought of promoting it this widely to students, but it would definitely be beneficial," Orr said. "I wasn't aware that this was an ongoing problem still."

Since her interview, signs advertising the availability of period products have been posted in the girls restroom and a cart of period products has been moved to the front of the library.

Though the library's new campaign to promote period products may have saved Gordon and Passos had it started a week earlier, following their confrontation with Stone, Gordon and her friend were assigned to the afternoon in ISS. Gordon said she was upset about the class time she missed during her half-day stay.

"We need to change our ISS rules," she said. "Missing your last two classes is not beneficial to you at all. It's just going to make things worse with your school."

Trevino's half-day trip to ISS resulted in her missing a test in third period, exemplifying the paradox ISS creates — the punishment for skipping class is missing even more class.

Principal Nicole Griffith acknowledged this

paradox, but she explained that alternative punishments, like mandatory service, are not allowed to be handed out as punishment by school law. Other options, like lunch detention, require more staff than is available.

"There's not a lot of options at our disposal," Griffith said.

Trevino and Gordon's situations also shed light on the discretionary nature of punishment in schools. While some offenses will land a student in the Alternative Learning Center with no exceptions, assistant principal Andy Baxa explains that giving out punishment is typically a more fluid process.

"It's not like there's a set decision chart,"

Baxa said.

Baxa acknowledged that because of the stigma surrounding periods, there's a chance that a male assistant principal would have reacted differently than a female assistant principal. When asked whether he would give out ISS to students who went off campus to change clothes or buy period products, Baxa couldn't give a definitive answer.

"It depends on the student, it depends on the situation," Baxa said. "If that's the first time I've ever dealt with the student, if that's the first thing they've ever done, more than likely, no, I'm not going to put the person in ISS. More than likely, I don't put a person in ISS, me personally, for the first offense, depending on what it is."

Trevino had been to ISS before, but this was Gordon's first time there. Both Griffith and Stone commented that situations involving leaving school for period-related issues are exceedingly rare.

Even so, Griffith understands the far-reaching implications of punishment-based systems like ISS and hopes to move McCallum towards a more rehabilitation-focused system.

"It's a long-term goal for McCallum to find ways to support our students in a more restorative way than using punishments that are going to continue to create a cycle where they're not being successful," Griffith said.

There's definitely menstrual products on campus and we'll often find some items that they can wear... there's definitely things that can be done other than going home.

— assistant principal Tamara Stone