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School Spotlight: Alternatives to Suspension/Expulsion

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years, there has been much research nationally into the areas of restorative justice practices and suspensions rates. In order to better understand these issues, the California Charter Schools Association began to investigate what the publicly available data indicate about differences between charter and traditional public school suspension rates. The CCSA research team relied on publicly available data from the California Department of Education to ensure that data was available for all schools and that others could replicate this methodology. The research team discovered some complications with the data because the California Department of Education (CDE) redacts its publicly available data files in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Due to limited availability of data, there is no one perfect file on which to perform any analysis of suspension rates. The research team therefore analyzed two different publicly available data sets from the CDE –unduplicated and duplicated suspension rate files – and found similar conclusions in both. Charter schools, on average suspend students at a similar and sometimes lower rates than do traditional public schools. This holds true for all ethnic subgroups as well as all grade levels (elementary, middle & high schools).

This *School Spotlight* chronicles five California charter schools' experiences implementing alternatives to the traditional suspensions/expulsion model, in an effort to keep students in the classroom and end the "suspension to prison pipeline." Information was gathered from interviews with charter leaders highlighting why their schools chose to proactively pursue discipline alternatives and the results of doing so. The schools interviewed varied by pedagogy, size, and geographic region, including a college preparatory elementary school, urban/suburban schools, a project based learning school, a comprehensive high school, and a conversion school.

ATTITUDES TOWARD SUSPENSION/EXPULSION

When it comes to student discipline, many charter school administrators are starting to look in a direction other than the traditional suspension/expulsion model to better serve their students and keep them in the classroom. "There is so much research out there showing that suspension does not work and that it disproportionately targets males of color and special needs scholars," explains Shara Hegde, Executive Director of Cornerstone Academy Preparatory School. "We know that suspensions/expulsions are not effective practices," agrees Amy Epstein, Executive Director of Data, Assessment and Tiered Support.

“Loads of research, as well as our experience as educators, shows that Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) systems not only supports academic performance of children, but also decreases the need for more aversive interventions (like suspensions or expulsions),” says Preston Smith, CEO & President of Rocketship Education. “We know that removing a student from class, even at the elementary level, impedes his academic progress and is strongly correlated with students becoming incarcerated later in life.”

At Locke High School, one of the Green Dot Public Schools, student retention is something that the principal is held accountable for. “When we moved into Locke High School, our understanding from the community was that kids had been quietly pushed out of the school through suspensions and then expulsions,” describes Cristina de Jesus, CEO and President of Green Dot Public Schools. “Student retention has always been a key metric that we have looked at, school by school. We want to keep kids in school.” Los Angeles Unified School District, Green Dot’s authorizer, has also recently implemented a Zero Suspensions Plan for all district and charter schools. As part of this plan, all schools must suspend no more than 5% of their student body, or cut their number of suspensions by 50% each year.

ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPENSION/EXPULSION

What are some of the alternatives to the traditional suspension/expulsion model of discipline? Charter schools across the state have been employing behavior plans, community service, family meetings, social and emotional learning, Positive Behavioral Intervention & Supports systems, a Resolution Conference, Student Allies, a rotational model, the *Safe and Civil Schools* program, an Advisory program, and restorative practices, resulting in fewer student behavior issues, fewer suspensions, and more classroom learning, over time.

Behavior Plans Cornerstone Academy Preparatory School, which serves grades K-6, has implemented a school-wide behavior plan that includes the character education and core values that students learn and practice in daily interactions with one another. “The behavior plan is the foundation for the entire school and this works for most scholars,” says Executive Director Hegde.

Sometimes instructors build an individualized behavior plan for students that need more support. Teachers ask questions like, “Does the scholar need a whole day plan, or is there behavior that is just happening in the morning?” They create a sticker chart that emphasizes positive behaviors for each student who needs such visual reinforcement. This is shared with the child’s parents who continue to implement the positive behaviors at home. “We want the positive behaviors to become instinctual after a while,” explains Hegde. We want scholars to get to a point where they want to do better whether or not they receive a reward.”

For example, one child needed a break every so often, to help him keep from becoming disruptive. In his behavior plan Cornerstone instituted a strategy whereby, whenever the student began to feel frustrated, he was given a choice of alternative activities for 10 minutes. After that, he understood he was to go back to join the rest of the class. In another instance, a scholar who vandalized the bathroom was required to don gloves, clean up the mess, and send a letter of apology to the custodian. “We had permission from the parents to do this,” clarifies Hegde. “I’ve never had a parent not agree with this because we always make sure that the restorative consequence is directly related to the disruptive behavior. Part of this is the culture that we have established and the fact that our parents already know us so they trust us.”

At Rocketship Education, a Charter Management Organization (CMO) with 13 schools nationwide serving grades K-5, designated teachers do daily check ins and check outs for students struggling with negative behaviors.“ Each of these students has a customized behavior plan with very specific and manageable goals (e.g., goal to say “shut up” only three times today instead of the usual 10 times a day; every time they say “shut up” they get a mark on their chart). Students review and discuss their progress on a daily basis with their check in/check out teacher twice a day, once at the start and once at the end of the school day.

Rocketship has extensive experience serving students with major emotional/behavioral issues. “I remember one student we had two years ago who was routinely isolated in his previous school in special day class,” describes CEO and President Smith. “He would strip himself down naked, in front of the whole class, when he got upset. Rocketship, however, does not isolate students with behavioral challenges and is committed to ensuring its classrooms serve all kids.” With a specialized behavior plan and a lot of patience and persistence, by the end of the school year, Rocketship helped this student learn how to control his behavior and stop stripping down naked when he got upset. “Like any form of learning, it took a lot of time, but I was very proud that throughout the process we stayed true to our model of meaningful inclusion for students with special needs,” says CEO Smith.

Community Service At Education for Change (EFC), which serves grades TK-8, the preference is to assign in-school community service or in-school switching of classrooms to students that are acting out. “For example, we have had an 8th grader spend a day in the Kindergarten room performing community service,” describes CEO Hae-Sin Thomas. “We don’t think of this as punishment. We think of this as a restorative consequence.”

The point at which a child acts out means they have a very specific need that needs to be addressed. For instance, Thomas mentioned a student who is always seeking attention. “We have to remove him from the setting where he is seeking attention. He has had lots of counseling, but he still has poor peer skills and few friends. He verbally assaults other kids. When he acts out, he is removed from that setting and is sent to EFC’s home office.” While there, the scholar spends part of his time helping with office tasks, and part of his time doing his work. “He does well at the home office interacting with all adults and his behavior is dramatically better and helpful,” says Thomas. “At the same time, he is reflecting about why he is there. This has worked for him, but every student is different and we have to tailor our supports and methodologies accordingly.”

Family Meetings Leadership Public Schools, a CMO with four college-prep high schools, holds weekly Family Meetings on its campuses during which the entire school community comes together. These meetings are run by the student dean and student government. “We really engage our students as leaders and give them the chance to contribute positively, including as conveners and facilitators of Family Meetings,” says Executive Director of Data, Assessment and Tiered Support Epstein. Every school within the Leadership Public Schools family has a set of values that is actively taught and reinforced during the Family Meetings including grit, kindness, persistence, and achievement. At the Family Meetings, students, nominated by a fellow classmate or a teacher, are acknowledged for exemplifying a school value or positive character trait. “We want to help students see the benefits of behaving in a positive way, and approaching

conflict constructively, rather than engaging in behaviors that would traditionally lead to suspension," explains Epstein.

Social and Emotional Learning Rocketship grounds its disciplinary work in social and emotional learning supports. "Our schools focus on modeling and reinforcing positive behaviors rather than a focus on punishing children for negative behaviors," says President and CEO Smith. Rocketship employs the Kimochis® Educator's Tool Kit, a universal, school-based, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program designed to give children the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively. The Kimochis® curriculum incorporates innovative and fun activities developed to teach children how to manage challenging social situations with skill, character and confidence, and can be used as:

- A Positive Behavior Support Program (PBS)
- A Response to Intervention (RTI)
- A Character Education Program
- A Prevention and Early Intervention Tool for Bullying

Rocketship also utilizes RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing and Regulating emotions), an evidence-based approach for integrating social and emotional learning into schools, developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. RULER helps to create a positive learning climate and to develop the emotional skills of all adults and students within the school. It is a mindset and a language with which everyone in the school community can talk about their emotions, especially students. "Many of our students confront very challenging experiences at home and in their community. Learning how to understand and manage their emotions is a critical skill for their success and well-being in school and life," says Smith.

Cornerstone Academy Preparatory School has also developed social-emotional strategies to use with students. For example, if a scholar is struggling with how to play with their classmates at recess and using unkind words, his teacher will role play with him as practice for how to interact properly with another student. Later, there would be a follow up meeting to see how the student is employing these strategies.

Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports System Leadership Public Schools halved its 2013-14 suspension/expulsion rate in 2014-15, utilizing a Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) system with three tiers. The Tier 2 Team meets weekly and is comprised of all non-classroom behavior/emotional support staff, including the Student Dean, Intervention Coordinator and Student Ally at each school plus any additional counselors available at the site. The Academic Dean, Principal, and two to four teachers participate monthly to look at bigger trends and to inform ongoing planning of professional development, coaching, and other school-wide structures. Students experiencing behavioral issues may be referred to the Tier 2 Team which uses a PBIS process called TIPS (Team-Initiated Problem-Solving) to connect with the referrer and student (and usually other teachers as well as parents/guardians), study and understand the student's needs, and engage him or her with the right types of support.

Every staff person at Leadership also employs a set of robust universal supports to try to meet the social/emotional and behavioral needs of kids. "We want to help our adult staff members

see how to model good behavior and learn how to relate to students," says Executive Director of Data, Assessment and Tiered Support Epstein. Teachers learn how to deal with student conflict via "no-nonsense nurturing training" to keep little things from turning into big problems. "If I have a bad day as a student and refuse to take off my hat in class, my teacher should talk quietly with me outside in the hall, listen to what I have to say, and ask what I, the student, need at that moment," she explains. "Maybe there was no food in my house today, or my brother was shot." This kind of open dialogue keeps students from being sent to the office because in such a situation, what really needs to happen is for the student and teacher to talk. After such a conversation, the teacher documents the incident within the student's account in Leadership's Google system.

Resolution Conference As a next step, the Leadership Google system enables the teacher to invite the student to a Resolution Conference, which focuses on how a student can do better in class. The Resolution Conference is an opportunity for teachers and students to work together in a positive, non-judgmental way. "We believe this is part of the teacher's job because it's part of teaching behavior skills," describes Executive Director of Data, Assessment and Tiered Support Epstein. "It's a learning partnership." The teacher is trained to ask empathetic questions during the Resolution Conference and to collaborate with the student to identify and address problems getting in the way of learning. The vast majority of problems are successfully addressed through one to three Resolution Conferences. In cases where Resolution Conferences do not address problems, the student is referred to the Tier 2 Team and a Student Ally.

Student Ally How does the Student Ally help students with more complex problems? He or she supports students to identify, articulate, develop, and achieve behavioral, relational and mindset goals. The Student Ally works as a member of a coordinated services team and is assigned a group of students experiencing behavioral barriers to learning. Student and Ally work in five week Response to Intervention cycles (RTI) and meet daily using a research-based Check-In-Check-Out (CICO) process.

Ally and student work together to:

- Identify goals for learning and wellness that the student views as important and meaningful
- Stay focused on goals on a daily basis
- Notice and celebrate accomplishments
- Quickly name and address problems/barriers from a growth mindset before little problems get bigger
- Help the student communicate effectively with teachers, parents and peers in support of their goals
- Collect and reflect on data every day to guide ongoing action and improvement

Rotational Model In accordance with Rocketship's rotational model, students attend classes with three different teachers each day. With different classrooms and teachers, students are exposed to different personalities and subjects, which is a real win since there is always something in one of those three rotations at which a child can excel. This builds confidence and a love for learning. "If we see a student is only struggling in one space and succeeding in others, it helps us find solutions," explains President and CEO Smith. "Additionally, we know that if students aren't being taught on their level, behavior issues increase. Our focus on personalizing the learning experience for each child helps us prevent negative behaviors from occurring in the first place."

Safe and Civil Schools Green Dot Public Schools has drastically reduced its suspension rate from 118% in 2011-2012 to 37% in 2014-15 by building a structure of positive behavior via the *Safe and Civil Schools* program. Designed to help school staff improve safety and civility across all school settings, *Safe and Civil Schools* comes with a host of behavioral protocols for use both inside and outside the classroom. By improving safety and civility across all school settings, school personnel lay a foundation to engage students and enhance learning. The goal of these program materials is to empower school staff with techniques to help all students behave responsibly and respectfully through some basic processes and beliefs.

The beliefs include:
*All students must be treated with dignity and respect.
*Students should be taught the skills and behaviors necessary for success.
*Motivation and responsibility should be encouraged through positive interactions and building relationships with students.
*Student misbehavior represents a teaching opportunity.

The processes include:
*Using data. Objective information about behavior is more reliable than labels, conclusions, or stereotypes.
*Structuring for success. All school settings should be organized to promote successful behavior from students.
*Collaboration. Helping students behave responsibly is the shared responsibility of all school staff.
*Self-reflection. If student behavior is irresponsible, school staff should reflect on what they can do to help students.

"These processes and beliefs form a structure for procedures that help prevent students from 'falling through the cracks' into school failure," explains CEO and President de Jesus. "We have been very thoughtful about this and we've said it's not just about the number of students suspended/expelled, it's about changing the hearts and minds of students and the culture of the building. Severe discipline issues have declined as we have implemented these alternative approaches to suspension/expulsion."

Advisory At the same time, Green Dot is honing its advisory program to ensure that teachers are clearly outlining, practicing and employing strategies to help kids understand replacement behaviors so that they're not getting into trouble in the first place. "We are specifically targeting programs for our African American male populations because they were the ones who were previously being suspended at a higher rate," explains CEO and President de Jesus.

Leadership Public Schools also has an Advisory teacher who is assigned to the same students for four years, as they make their way through high school. "That teacher is a model for good behavior and can sometimes be one of the few constants in a student's life," says Executive Director of Data, Assessment and Tiered Support Epstein.

Restorative Practices When students are suspended at Leadership Public Schools, they must return to the school with a parent after an in-school or out-of-school suspension, and participate in a Restorative Circle. "If a student is actually doing out-of-school suspension, they

go home with a lot of work," emphasizes Executive Director of Data, Assessment and Tiered Support Epstein. "A teacher is always checking in with them and helping them reflect on what happened and the harm that took place, to prepare them to meet with the person who has been harmed within the safety of the restorative circle structure."

How does a Restorative Circle work? It begins with bringing everyone who was impacted by the suspended student's actions, into the circle, and having each person answer a question like, "Share someone you respect and something about them that is important to you." Only one person may talk at one time, the individual holding the talking stick. The student who was suspended is then supposed to ask the victim what they can do to repair the harm that has been done because of the perpetrator's actions. Anyone who has been harmed gets to talk. The parents of the students are invited to speak. Then, the young person who was suspended describes what it was like to hear from the person harmed and makes a commitment to follow up with concrete actions to make the situation better. It is the school dean's job to follow up to ensure that the student takes responsibility and does what they said they would do to repair the situation. An example might include completing an extra assignment on the effects of bullying in California.

For more egregious violations, the restorative process might involve the entire school. "For example, we had an instance where several sophomores used selfie sticks to take photos up the skirts of two of our female teachers, and posted these photos online," recalls Epstein. "After these young men came back from out-of-school suspension, they first worked with a counselor to name and talk about their decisions and behavior and the negative impact it had had on their teachers, classmates, and themselves. They then participated in a full day of Restorative Circles involving all 10th grade students and teachers. In each Circle, they acknowledged and apologized for the harm they had caused and listened to their teachers' and classmates' accounts of feeling violated and scared by what had happened. There was not a dry eye in the room." As a follow up, after three months of preparation, these male students were part of a student team responsible for organizing and facilitating Gender Day, a series of school-wide workshops focusing on the importance of gender equality and respect. "This restorative approach brought about a deep transformation in behavior and awareness for these students; and a sense for all students that change and healing are always possible," says Epstein. "This is something that a traditional expulsion could never have accomplished."

Cornerstone Academy Preparatory School engages in restorative practices with its students, too, to reinforce good behaviors. If a student has behaved poorly, he is often required to write an apology letter--a reflection on how his behavior impacted those around him, how it doesn't reflect Cornerstone's core values, and what he is going to do in the future, if he finds himself in a similar situation. The scholar is then required to hand-deliver the apology letter to those he has offended, and apologize to the entire class. Other times the restorative practice employed might be a mediation session, often including multiple students, where those involved in a particular incident could talk out what happened, how they felt about it, and how to prevent a similar escalation in the future.

TEACHERS

In order for a charter school to successfully implement alternative approaches to traditional suspension and expulsion, the entire staff must be on board. For this reason, many charter schools have found it critical to be upfront about their discipline philosophy during the interview

process. “We added a few questions to the teacher/administrator vetting process so that everyone is clear and philosophically aligned when they apply for a position with us,” explains Green Dot President and CEO de Jesus. “Because our approach differs from most traditional school environments, we’ve learned that we have to be very transparent with teacher candidates during the hiring interview and tell them that they are expected to serve all kids, even those with severe discipline issues or needs,” agrees Rocketship CEO and President Smith.

Once teachers are hired, the appropriate supports also need to be in place for them to be successful since students with severe behavioral challenges can be emotionally taxing on staff. “The biggest pushback that we have gotten from teachers about eliminating suspensions and expulsions is that they don’t always feel supported,” describes de Jesus. In addition, new teachers are fearful of loss of control in the classroom. Helping teachers hone their classroom management based on network wide systems is often great start. However, every child is unique, so school leaders must solidly support teachers and partner with them to solve behavioral challenges. “When students emerge as a significant challenge, we ensure teachers and leaders have the resources to meet the student’s needs,” says Smith. “At Rocketship, we work with our teachers to ensure they have the mindsets and the tools to deal with challenging behaviors. From counseling services to the support of our special education team and school psychologist, we’re able to make gains for our students with significant behavioral challenges.” Green Dot Public Schools is also rolling out multi-tiered methods of support to help address teacher concerns.

During the 2014-15 school year, Leadership Public Schools trained all of its teachers to use both the Resolution Conference and the Restorative Circle. As part of the training, staff were asked to read “Lost at School: Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them” by Harvard professor, Ross W. Greene, Ph.D. “We found it beneficial to go through the process of looking at the research together and to give staff the opportunity to experience the restorative process themselves,” explains Executive Director of Data, Assessment and Tiered Support Epstein. The trainings provided teachers with examples of combative conversations that they might have with students, how to approach those conversations and the kind of language they could use in such situations via “no-nonsense nurturing training” to keep little things from turning into big problems.

Next, teachers were asked to view teaching appropriate behavior to students in the same way that they do their job of teaching scholars, knowledge and skills. “They were asked to believe that students need to be shown how to behave,” says Epstein. Teachers were given an assessment of lagging skills and unsolved problems and asked to commit to observing what students in their classroom don’t know how to do and then try to teach them how to develop these behavioral skills. “For example, there were situations where every time there is some kind of transition, a student falls apart,” explains Epstein. ‘We asked our teachers to map out how to keep that from happening using the assessment tool. Through the training, teachers discovered that this inability of the student to shift from one mindset to another is an example of a lagging skill. This helped them to understand how to better support a student with this issue going forward.”

Education for Change is shifting its focus toward the question, “How do we engage all kids?” “Our teachers have mostly bought in, except when they get that kid that they just want to go away,” says CEO Thomas. “These days, we are pretty clear from the top that we don’t write

children off and that we're an unconditional education organization that serves all kids, which is really hard for some teachers. We have been transitioning those teachers out over time. We are very clear about our school philosophy during the hiring process."

'I often hear teachers say to administrators, 'What are you going to do about this?' when a scholar is disruptive in the classroom," describes Cornerstone Academy Preparatory School Executive Director Hegde. "We know, however, that there are actually multiple things that could have been done in the classroom that could have prevented a scholar's disruptive behavior from escalating into a much bigger situation. That's why at Cornerstone, we know that we have to support our teachers as they reinforce scholar behavior plans and the school values. We always hear the best teachers say 'I don't send kids to the office,' and what that really means is they are owning their actions in the classroom and thinking about how to reach their kids." Cornerstone also looks for a good mission-fit in any potential new hires. "They need to be on board with this philosophy of serving all students," emphasizes Hegde.

PARENTS

Since parents are partners with teachers when it comes to a student's educational success, it is important to regularly engage parents in order to understand and mitigate any behavioral issues a student might have. Parents are also key to ensuring that positive behaviors learned at school are implemented in the home environment too.

Cornerstone Academy Preparatory School encourages its staff to build relationships with scholars' families to help discover the root of a student's challenging behavior. "We are also trying to be proactive and have our teachers do home visits," says Executive Director Hegde. "Sometimes we build an individualized plan for scholars that need more support and we involve the parents who continue to implement it at home. If we're doing something at the school site, it needs to be reinforced at home."

Education for Change stays in close contact with the CMO's Parent Leadership Council to educate parents about and seek support for the common vision of serving all kids. "For the most part, there is support for what we are trying to do," says CEO Thomas. "There are some parents who are upset that the 'bad' kids aren't going to be kicked out and we explain what we are about and why it's important to serve all students." The Parent Leadership Council is key to helping EFC communicate this message.

Rocketship's educational approach is based on 3 pillars: excellent teachers and leaders, personalized learning, and engaged parents. "We do a lot of work to partner with our parent community, particularly the parents of students with severe special education needs, so that they are living by the same rules at home and at school," explains President and CEO Smith. Rocketship employs regular parent conferences and check ins about student progress, both academically and behaviorally, which helps support positive behaviors outside of school and in the long term. "We find parents are exhilarated to receive good news about their son or daughter, especially those with the biggest behavioral challenges, and to see a positive path forward," he continues.

LOOKING FORWARD

When asked what advice she has for other charter schools looking to shift away from the traditional disciplinary approaches of suspension and expulsion, Cornerstone Academy

Preparatory School Executive Director Hegde suggests, “The foundation of any alternative policies to suspension/expulsion needs to be a strong school culture. Students need the principal, their teacher, and the lunch lady to all respond to disruptive behavior in the same way. For that to happen, you need to communicate any shifts to all parties and school stakeholders involved, and the “why” behind your decision to move to an alternative approach.”

Education for Change CEO Thomas agrees, “You need a school culture that is the means by which you create well-behaved, controlled students. To do this successfully, you need to train staff about restorative practices, create restorative structures, and implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. You need to get rid of the traditional belief system that some kids just don’t belong there. You need all staff to be truly student-centered versus school centered. All of this is a real value shift for many schools.” She also offers, “I do worry that people focus on lowering suspensions, which is a good place to start, but at the heart of it is, why do you have suspension rates to begin with? That’s what we need to be getting at.”

Green Dot Public Schools CEO and President de Jesus concurs, “I would tell schools new to this work, ‘Don’t just focus on reducing the number of suspensions and expulsions. Make sure that you are also influencing student behavior to see long-term change.’ In terms of advice, in order to strategically and effectively work with students, you have to have as a baseline a positive behavior system as a foundation, like our Safe and Civil Schools program that I mentioned earlier.”

Leadership Public Schools Executive Director of Data, Assessment and Tiered Support offers, “I would look at the existing systems that you have in place: advisory, family assembly, recognition systems, and develop some common language around shared values so you have a language for talking about the behaviors that you are looking for from students. We all want connection and belonging and so the more that you create such an environment, the fewer disruptive problems you will have from students. Think about creating a structure where students and teachers regularly put their heads together to solve problems. Also, a few key staff members at your school should attend a training to learn about restorative practices and how to lead Restorative Circles.”

“It’s challenging,” says Rocketship President and CEO Smith. “To successfully employ alternatives like restorative practices and behavior plans, you need amazing people, a relationship of trust with parents, and you need to be purposeful with your resources and supports. Success can require daily phone calls and check ins/check outs, and a system that is super predictable so that the kids know that you are always going to be there and what the consequences are for misbehavior. But, we don’t do this work because it’s easy; we do it because our students, families and communities deserve a great education that sets all kids up for success in middle school, high school, college and beyond.”