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# Zero Tolerance and Alternative Discipline Strategies

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Schools have a responsibility to use research-based, effective means to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment. Teachers cannot teach, and students cannot learn, in a climate marked by chaos and disruption.

There is controversy, however, over how best to achieve that goal. Since the early 1990s, increasing incidence of campus violence led many schools to adopt the disciplinary philosophy of *zero tolerance*. Originally used primarily for drug enforcement, the term became widely adopted in schools as a policy that mandates severe consequences regardless of the seriousness of the behavior or differences in circumstances. In 1994, the Gun Free Schools Act introduced a national policy of zero tolerance for weapons in schools through a mandatory calendar year expulsion for possession of firearms. Some states, board of education agencies, and schools have expanded zero tolerance considerably beyond federal law, suspending and expelling students for drug and alcohol abuse, threats, fighting, and even failure to complete homework.

## **OVERVIEW OF ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

Zero tolerance policies assume that removing students who engage in disruptive behavior will maintain a safe learning environment as well as deter others from disruption.

### **Characteristics of Zero Tolerance Policies**

Although there is no single accepted definition of the term *zero tolerance*, the approach is characterized by the use of more severe penalties, primarily suspension and expulsion, for both major and minor violations of the school disciplinary code, in order to send a message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated. While most schools use zero tolerance for more egregious behaviors, media accounts have described hundreds of cases in which students are suspended or expelled for what appear to be relatively trivial infractions, including possession of squirt guns, guns cut out of paper, paper clips, plastic knives brought in a lunch box to cut chicken, aspirin, or organic cough drops.

### **Outcomes of Zero Tolerance Policies**

Although widely accepted as a no-nonsense approach to violence prevention, there is little or no evidence that strict zero tolerance policies have contributed to reducing student misbehavior or improving school safety (e.g., Skiba & Nesting, 2002; Skiba et al., 2006). Studies of suspension have consistently documented that at-risk students do not change their behavior as a result of suspension, that suspension is associated with school dropout and juvenile incarceration, and that schools with higher rates of suspension and expulsion tend to have lower test scores and a less satisfactory school climate. In short, there are no data that zero tolerance contributes in any way to school safety or improved student behavior.

Although the causal link is unclear, there is some correlational evidence that zero tolerance is associated with increased suspensions and expulsions for students of color. African American students have consistently been found to be suspended two to three times as often as other students, and similarly overrepresented in office referrals, corporal punishment, and school expulsion. This overrepresentation has not been found to be due to poverty, nor is there evidence that African Americans receive more suspensions due to increased rates or intensity of misbehavior (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

## **ALTERNATIVES TO ZERO TOLERANCE: TEACH, DON'T JUST PUNISH**

As concerns about the fairness and effectiveness of zero tolerance discipline have mounted, and because the 2001 No Child Left Behind regulations have required schools to decrease use of suspension and

expulsion, many schools and school districts are examining alternative strategies that can prevent and deter school violence without sacrificing students' educational opportunity. Such alternatives include the following practices:

### **Graduated Discipline**

Many districts ensure that consequences are matched with the seriousness of the offense (sometimes termed "common sense discipline"). Serious incidents that truly threaten the safety of other students and staff continue to receive more severe consequences, but less serious behaviors are met with graduated responses, such as reprimands, restitution, counseling, parent contact, and/or behavioral contracts.

### **Using Office Referrals and Suspension Data**

Many districts already keep sophisticated data about office referrals and disciplinary actions. This information can be used to identify students with problematic behaviors who would benefit from a step-wise intervention plan involving school, home, and community resources, and to monitor the fairness of school discipline for low income and minority students.

### **Preventive and Instructional Strategies**

Many of the disruptive incidents that lead students to be suspended or expelled can be avoided by teaching students alternatives to violence and disruption, through strategies such as conflict resolution, school-wide bullying prevention, drug and alcohol abuse programs, gang prevention strategies, or improved staff training in classroom behavior management. Prevention also involves addressing academic deficits that put students at risk not only for school failure but for chronic behavior problems.

### **Expand Available Options**

Schools that decrease their use of suspension and expulsion often put in place a large variety of options to respond to potential disruptions, such as peer mediation, teen courts, restitution, anger management training, and school-wide positive behavior supports (see the National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in Recommended Resources).

### **SUMMARY**

The root of the word *discipline* comes from the Greek *discipere*, to teach or comprehend. All schools must seek to prevent violence, but those schools that are the most effective in handling disruption have found that removing students from school is at best a short-term solution. In the long run we can best ensure both the

fairness and effectiveness of disciplinary systems by seeking solutions that teach students alternatives to violence.

### **REFERENCES**

- Skiba, R. J., & Knesting, K. (2002). Zero tolerance, zero evidence: An analysis of school disciplinary practice. *New directions for youth development*, 92, 17–43.
- Skiba, R. J., & Rausch, M. K. (2006). Zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion: Questions of equity and effectiveness. In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook for classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 1063–1089). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Skiba, R. J., Reynolds, C. R., Graham, S., Sheras, P., Conoley, J. C., & Garcia-Vazquez, E. (2006). *Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations*. Report by the American Psychological Association of the Zero Tolerance Task Force. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved on October 2, 2009, from <http://www.apa.org/ed/cpse/zttfreport.pdf>

### **RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

#### **Print**

- Reyes, A. H. (Ed.). (2006). *Discipline, achievement, and race: Is zero tolerance the answer?* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

This book provides an analysis of the policy, the practice, and effects of zero tolerance, and recommendations for change, with a particular focus on the consequences of racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline.

- Skiba, R. J., & Noam, G. G. (Eds.). (2002). *Zero tolerance: Can suspension and expulsion keep schools safe? [New Directions for Youth Development, 92]*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This special journal issue is devoted to examining data from research and law on zero tolerance. Articles in the issue critique the effectiveness of zero tolerance, and explore disciplinary alternatives and models that make a positive contribution to school safety and youth development.

- Skiba, R. J., & Rausch, M. K. (2006). School disciplinary systems: Alternatives to suspension and expulsion. In G. G. Bear & K. M. Minke (Eds.), *Children's needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (pp. 87–102). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

An overview of the research regarding zero tolerance and effective alternatives.

## Online

American Psychological Association, *Zero Tolerance Task Force Report*: <http://www.apa.org/ed/cpse/zttfreport.pdf>

Report of the APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, which concluded that “zero tolerance policies as implemented have failed to achieve the goals of an effective system of school discipline” and recommended alternative strategies.

California State PTA, *Alternatives to zero tolerance*: <http://www.capta.org/sections/programs/cc-zero-tolerance.cfm>

Practical ideas for school intervention.

National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): <http://www.pbis.org>

National clearinghouse for one of most promising and widely implemented alternatives to zero tolerance, positive behavior supports.

The Equity Project (Indiana University): <http://www.ceep.indiana.edu/equity>

Provides descriptions of projects, resources, and downloadable reports and publications dealing with school discipline, school violence prevention, and equity in education.

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