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Zero Tolerance: The School Woodshed

By Rhonda B. Armistead

A 1st grader is disciplined for “sexual harassment” after smacking a classmate’s bottom on the playground and the police are called in; a high school student is expelled after a butter knife brought to school accidentally falls out of her locker; a 17-year-old is arrested and expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band. ...

Few policies in education have proven to be as universally ineffective—even counterproductive—as “zero tolerance.” Brought to prominence in 1994 when Congress enacted the Gun-Free Schools Act to address weapons-based school violence and drug problems, zero-tolerance edicts have become the virtual woodshed of school discipline: They are solely punitive, and lack any positive connection to schools’ primary purpose—learning and development.

A zero-tolerance program’s goal is to act as a deterrent and provide swift intervention for misconduct, sending a strong, “one strike and you’re out” message to students. It prescribes non-negotiable punishment (typically, suspension or expulsion) for a specified behavior, regardless of the extent or context of the infraction. Possession of a butter knife and possession of a switchblade, for instance, automatically receive the same punishment, even though common sense indicates a different intention and degree of risk in the two infractions.

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Such a one-size-fits-all framework seriously limits administrators’ use of their professional judgment in a given situation, and often forces them to impose punishments they otherwise feel are inappropriate to the facts. It also fails to take into account the intricacies of child development, individual characteristics, risk factors, and underlying causes, all of which shape behavior.

Despite the zero-tolerance concept’s shortcomings, however, states and school districts have extended its reach beyond weapons and drugs, to include an array of behaviors, such as sexual harassment, bullying, and dress-code violations. School officials have been responding to legitimate concerns over tragedies such as the Columbine High School shootings, and to increases in youth violence generally. And they have raised the zero-tolerance banner in part as a shield against potential liability. But far from achieving their intended goal of improved behavior and safety, schools are now struggling with the unintended consequences of applying such draconian discipline so broadly. Press reports regularly focus on the absurd extremes to which zero tolerance can be stretched. But a deeper, more pervasive problem lies in the consequent increase in negative outcomes plaguing most schools today.

According to reports from groups such as the American Bar Association and the American Psychological Association, zero-tolerance policies are associated with declines in academic achievement and increases in student misconduct, school dropouts, and poor attitudes toward adults. Research also links zero tolerance to a dramatic rise in suspensions and

expulsions and to more frequent referrals to the juvenile-justice system for infractions once handled in schools. Although the policy has been presented as a way to improve school climate, its byproduct of higher rates of suspension and expulsion is associated with less satisfactory ratings of climate and disproportionately greater time spent by schools on disciplinary matters.

Transferring treatable behavior problems to the juvenile-justice system also has economic consequences. The anti-crime organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids has noted that the cost of keeping a child in juvenile detention for one year runs from \$35,000 to \$50,000, compared with \$12,000 to \$15,000 per year for prevention and intervention programs. Moreover, for each young person kept from adopting a life of crime, the country saves an estimated \$1.7 million.

In an era in which education policy rightly emphasizes reliance on evidence-based strategies, the data should speak for themselves. It is time for zero-tolerance policies to be re-evaluated and revised.

To start, we should stop allowing the punitive *policy* of zero tolerance to co-opt the protective *principle* of zero tolerance, which is an essential underpinning of safe and supportive schools. Schools should never tolerate behavior that disrupts, disrespects, threatens, or harms others. Bullying is not just “kids being kids.” Smacking a classmate’s bottom, even without sexual intent, is not appropriate playground behavior. The sooner and more directly we address even small infractions with appropriate interventions, the better. But it is important to keep in mind that the primary objective of discipline is to help children learn from their mistakes.

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Discipline should teach students appropriate decisionmaking and behavior, as well as a rational relationship between actions and consequences. This starts with clearly defining behavioral expectations and then reinforcing these with skills development. Where students need direct instruction and skills development in interpersonal relations or conflict resolution, the school community needs to make a commitment to embed instruction in these social skills directly in the curriculum. Positive Behavioral Support is one type of evidence-based prevention program being successfully implemented in many schools nationwide.

Misbehavior is also full of “teachable moments” effective discipline programs can use to advantage. These include giving students direct feedback about the appropriateness of their behavior and providing opportunities for modeling, guided practice, and critical feedback. We also need to make sure that we are teaching the desired lesson. For the 1st grader who smacked his classmate’s bottom, the lesson is “we don’t hit in play or in anger,” or “how else can you get a friend’s attention?” Defining the behavior as sexual harassment is irrelevant and introduces a concept that a 7-year-old is developmentally unprepared to understand.

Equally important is ensuring that consequences are proportionate to the misconduct. Children and youths care deeply about fairness. Excessive punishment teaches them to mistrust the decisionmaking system and the adults who run it.

Perhaps the most overlooked facet of effective discipline is identifying and addressing the underlying cause of the misconduct. This includes understanding the student's developmental level, the motivation and reasoning behind the misconduct, environmental factors, implications of the behavior, resulting outcomes, and how the misconduct is working to help the student either get or avoid something. These considerations are at the heart of "functional behavior assessment," a technique required by federal law before suspending or expelling a student with disabilities and that can be helpful for all students. Its goal is to determine the consequence or disciplinary action that is most likely to decrease future occurrences of the misconduct.

A student with severe performance anxiety might start a fight the day before an oral presentation, for example, knowing that the punishment will be suspension. Getting out of the presentation thus becomes more important than staying out of trouble. Disciplining this student is unlikely to work if it only addresses the symptom—the misconduct—and not the underlying cause. Brief counseling with the school psychologist or counselor is an alternative that could address both the poor judgment involved in starting a fight and the performance anxiety that prompted it.

Does this mean that discipline should never include serious consequences? Absolutely not. But punishment should be balanced with learning. We need policies that allow

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administrators the latitude to respond in accordance with the unique characteristics of each student and situation. Principals need the authority to employ their professional judgment in concert with the skills of staff members knowledgeable about child development, behavior, mental health, and classroom management.

Parents are an important part of the equation as well. Their understanding of and investment in reasonable discipline policies not only reduces potential liability, but also enhances the effectiveness of discipline practices. Signing a discipline policy is not enough. School leaders need to engage parents in policy development, communication around developmentally appropriate considerations and expectations for students, and ongoing prevention programming.

We all have a stake in ensuring safe, orderly, and civil learning environments. To do that, though, we must stop expecting, and then promoting, sound-bite solutions to complex issues. In conflating the commitment to prevent misbehavior with a mandate for uniformly harsh punishment, we limit our ability to focus on proven practices.

Discipline and punishment are not synonymous, and we need to separate the two. If not, we simply will build more and bigger woodsheds, at a cost measured in wasted public dollars, missed learning opportunities, and, for some, the lost potential of children's lives.

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