

Zero Tolerance Policies in Education: Is it Time to Reconsider?

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ABSTRACT

Every school year, there is bound to be some sort of behavioral management challenge for school administrations across the United States. Some schools are standing by a policy of zero tolerance for the commission of certain acts. This is problematic for children because it stresses punishment over corrective measures, and it contributes to a culture of fear within the school community in its entirety. The time has come for school leadership to review and potentially revoke these harsh zero tolerance policies that have been shown to have very little overall positive impact upon the students or those serving them.

Keywords: School Administration, Zero Tolerance, Education, Teaching.

INTRODUCTION

School administration is tasked with balancing many jobs within the structures of schools over the course of their careers. One of which is often dealing with school discipline of students who have broken the rules or have strayed from behavior that is considered to be acceptable. Many districts have defined policies of zero tolerance for certain situations that they deem to be the most unacceptable within these contexts. These statutes dictate that there will be a more severe response, and that any semblance of the act in question will be “charged” in the same manner regardless of degree of violation or outside forces acting upon that scenario. “Over time and in the most broad and strict sense, zero tolerance has come to refer to school or district-wide policies that mandate predetermined and typically harsh consequences or punishments (such as suspension or expulsion) for a wide variety of and broadly defined school rule violations” (Hanson, 2005, p.301). There are a wide range of negative social and emotional consequences to this form of “iron fisted” wielding of punishment, as well as complications that develop about what misgiving actually fits the criteria needed to dole out those punishments. It is likely time to truly examine whether zero tolerance, and all that comes with it, is not more readily replaced by something more effective and potentially less extreme in nature.

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

The distinction must be made early on between the theory that drives zero tolerance and the actual practicality of it, as it is applied by school leaders. “It sounds plausible in theory: If schools have tough, zero tolerance discipline policies with severe consequences, maybe teens will understand that they won’t get away with misbehavior” (Kennedy-Moore, 2016, p.1). Theoretically, this ideology lays out a plan where the subsequent punishment for a behavior or set of behaviors is the centralized factor in dissuading students from the commission of those violations. “At the core of zero tolerance philosophies and policy is the presumption that strong enforcement can act as a deterrent to other potentially disruptive students” (Skiba, 2014, p.28). Students are thought to avoid nefarious pathways because of where they will eventually lead from a consequential standpoint. Kennedy-Moore (2016) argues that this is likely a theory that

sounds cogent initially but falls apart when utilized in today's schools. She says that lengthy suspensions, expulsions, and ultra-tough discipline do little to minimize the behaviors that they aim to stop (p.1). In short, though the stringency of a school or district rises with zero tolerance, it does not create the setting that proponents claim it can provide. "The studies to date show that zero tolerance strategies have not achieved the goals of a safe and disciplined classroom" (Teske, 2011, p.89). The prior quote is from a "study of studies" about zero tolerance in education and concurs with the points made by others in their assessments of the topic matter. Hanson (2005) posits that there needs to be a discontinuation of zero tolerance for school-age children because of the poor outlook that it gives some students on the entire school experience. A culture of fear and domineering permeates the school culture (p.297). It is clear that zero tolerance, at least as it correlates to schools, needs rethinking and perhaps elimination.

The impersonal nature of zero tolerance is also listed as a problem by Cassidy and Jackson (2005), "School administrators also employ zero tolerance policies without addressing the root causes of negative behavior" (p.435). This can become cyclic, which only increases the likelihood that the rapport between staff and students is due to inherently sink into a state persistent decline. Bondy and Daniel (2008) confirm this "cycle" and add, "Zero tolerance policies fall under the category of retributive justice" (p.14). Building leaders typically do not want to be positioned or place their teachers in the position of delivering retribution or reprisal for the actions of a student. Furthermore, rapport-building can be a tenuous proposition, taking time to build in a positive fashion, and yet diminishes with only small amounts of negativity or rough spots. Another simple argument against these extreme policies for behavior modification is that do not work as intended. Detch, Njie, Potts, and Walton (2003) reviewed data over a three year period after schools enacted zero tolerance rules and realized that the amount of violent offenses actually rose (p.6). The opposite impact was felt from the institution of a more extreme response to defined misbehavior.

ALTERNATIVE MEASURES

Kennedy-Moore (2016) makes a key point that "preventative measures and flexible responses" need to serve as ample replacements for the rigid uniformity of zero tolerance procedures (p.2). "A sound policy offers administration some degree of discretion in responding to infractions" (McAndrews, 2001, p.2). Not all situations are representative of the initial cause that enabled a zero tolerance policy to be put into place. This leads to unwarranted and overly burdensome consequences for students who appear to have simply skirted the line of breaking a given rule. "A student with an aspirin in his pocket is not a drug dealer, and a student who accidentally brings nail clippers to school is not a murderer or a terrorist" (Black, 2015, p.829). This highlights the extraordinarily unfair nature of punishment under this system. Students are lumped into categories that are not always going to be reasonable. "Some have argued against zero tolerance policies, stating that in a desire to be tough no-nonsense and scrupulously equal in punishment, schools have sacrificed measured and proportional responses for mechanical, non-discretionary decision-making" (DeMitchell & Fries, 2007, p.214). There is very little done to work with students to try to understand their point of view or comprehend the motivations behind their actions, rather it is simply handing out a preordained punishment without further question. "Common sense and fairness are not necessarily served by the application of inflexible disciplinary rules that do not address the circumstances surrounding particular situations." (Kajs, 2006, p.16). I think fairness is a key word in this quote. We must be able to

look at things on a case-by-case basis in the world of schools, as no two events are wholly identical.

What vision can be generated by school building leaders that are effective alternatives to zero tolerance? Ward (2014) advocates for restorative justice as the main way to handle school issues, which is “A process with nonpunitive disciplinary responses focused on repairing harm done to relationships and people, it also engages all parties involved in the behavior and considers accountability” (p.3). This is important to note because it has implications rooted in helping children get to the root of the issue (and solving the problem) rather than thinking solely about our response to that issue. “We may not agree with our children or do exactly what they want, but by genuinely trying to understand our children’s perspective, we can respond more thoughtfully” (Kennedy-Moore, 2016, p.30.) When we allow the children to talk out the mitigating factors of their own behaviors, we get a window into possible strategies into the further prevention of that which was problematic.

THE PATH FORWARD

School administrators and the greater school community must have open conversations about the issues that face them. They can lead the charge towards abolishing destructive district and/or building level zero tolerance policies. Further, they can begin to work towards an approach to discipline that is guided by the student and the situation, rather than apply an overly punitive, damaging set of consequences that become a mandated requirement. The shift is in their hands, and they have the ability to prioritize and make the changes needed to help all students.

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