Zero Tolerance and Alternative Strategies: A Fact Sheet for Educators and Policymakers

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What Is Zero Tolerance?

"Zero Tolerance" initially was defined as consistently enforced suspension and expulsion policies in response to weapons, drugs and violent acts in the school setting. Over time, however, zero tolerance has come to refer to school or district-wide policies that mandate predetermined, typically harsh consequences or punishments (such as suspension and expulsion) for a wide degree of rule violation. Most frequently, zero tolerance policies address drug, weapons, violence, smoking and school disruption in efforts to protect all students' safety and maintain a school environment that is conducive to learning. Some teachers and administrators favor zero tolerance policies because they remove difficult students from school; administrators perceive zero tolerance policies as fast-acting interventions that send a clear, consistent message that certain behaviors are not acceptable in the school. However, research indicates that, as implemented, zero tolerance policies are ineffective in the long run and are related to a number of negative consequences, including increased rates of school drop out and discriminatory application of school discipline practices. Proven discipline strategies that provide more effective alternatives to broad zero tolerance policies should be implemented to ensure that all students have access to an appropriate education in a safe environment.

Prevalence of Zero Tolerance Policies and Practices

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education and the Center for Safe and Responsive Schools, at least 75% of schools report having zero tolerance policies for such serious offenses as:

- firearms (94%)
- weapons other than firearms (91%)
- alcohol (87%)
- drugs (88%)
- violence (79%)
- tobacco (79%)

Among disciplinary actions mandated by zero tolerance policies, suspension is most frequently used for an extensive range of common offenses, from attendance problems to disrespect and noncompliance. However, broad zero tolerance policies require that both minor and major disciplinary events be treated equally. A 1997 U.S. Department of Education study found that zero tolerance offenses frequently resulted in suspension or expulsion, including a) possession or use of a firearm (80%), b) possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm (78%), c) possession or distribution of alcohol, drugs or tobacco (80%) and d) physical fighting (81%).

Problems Associated With Broad Zero Tolerance Policies

Zero tolerance policies are complex, costly and generally ineffective. Suspension and expulsion may set individuals who already display antisocial behavior on an accelerated course to delinquency by putting them in a situation in which there is a lack of parental supervision and a greater opportunity to socialize

with other deviant peers. Further, expulsion results in the denial of educational services, presenting specific legal as well as ethical dilemmas for student with disabilities. Finally, there is no evidence that removing students from school makes a positive contribution to school safety.

Other problems associated with zero tolerance policies include:

- Racial disproportionality: Black students receive more harsh punitive measures (suspension, expulsion, corporal punishment) and less mild discipline than their non-minority peers, even controlling for Socio-economic Status.
- A greater negative impact on educational outcomes for students with disabilities (see below)
- Inconsistent application of zero tolerance policies, which often are not reserved exclusively for serious behaviors but applied indiscriminately to much lower levels of rule infraction.
- An increasing rate of suspensions and expulsions throughout the country, even though school violence generally has been stable or declining.
- Increasing the length of expulsion to two-year, three-year, or even permanent expulsion.
- A high rate of repeat suspensions that may indicate that suspension is ineffective in changing behavior for challenging students.
- Elevated dropout rates related to the repeated use of suspension and expulsion - the most likely consequence of suspension is additional suspension.

Zero Tolerance and Students With Special Needs

Zero tolerance policies may negatively impact students with disabilities to a greater degree than students without special needs. Although IDEA '97 requires continuing educational services for any student with a disability who is suspended for more than 10 consecutive days or 10 cumulative days in one academic year, policies that require suspension or expulsion for certain behaviors put many students with disabilities outside of the education setting, apart from educators who could help address their needs. Further, discipline practices that restrict access to appropriate education often exacerbate the problems of students with disabilities, increasing the probability that these students will not complete high school. School personnel charged with disciplining students with disabilities must be familiar with relevant components of IDEA '97, including the provisions for Interim Alternative Educational Placements (see resources below). Other alternatives are mandated by federal and state statute to assure that students with disabilities have ongoing access to an appropriate education.

Alternatives to Zero Tolerance Policies

Systemic changes in a school's or district's approach to discipline and behavioral intervention can significantly impact school climate and student learning. Schools implementing effective strategies have reported reductions in office discipline referrals by 20-60%; this results in improved access to academic engaged time and improved academic performance for all students. Schools can utilize their mental health experts - school psychologists, counselors and social workers - to research and develop discipline policies and positive behavior training strategies. Effective and promising alternatives to zero tolerance should involve families and community resources, including:

- Violence prevention - the most frequent components of a violence prevention program include a prevention curriculum; services from school psychologists, counselors or social workers; family and community involvement; and implementation of effective school-wide discipline practices. Some examples of proven programs include: Second Step, Resolving Conflict Creatively Program and Promoting Positive Thinking Strategies (see below).
- Social skills training and positive behavioral supports - interventions that help students with emotional/behavioral disorders and social skills deficits have potential to significantly improve school-wide behavior and safety. Effective programs include: Stop and Think (Project ACHIEVE) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

- Early intervention strategies - interventions that target low levels of inappropriate behavior before they escalate into violence can significantly reduce the need for harsh consequences later. Examples of proven practices include First Step to Success (kindergarten) and Positive Adolescent Choices Training (developed for African American youth).

Summary

Although zero tolerance policies were developed to assure consistent and firm consequences for dangerous behaviors, broad application of these policies has resulted in a range of negative outcomes with few if any benefits to students or the school community. Rather than increasing school safety, zero tolerance often leads to indiscriminate suspensions and expulsions for both serious and mild infractions and disproportionately impacts students from minority status backgrounds and those with disabilities. Serious dangerous behaviors require consistent and firm consequences to protect the safety of students and staff; however, for many offenses addressed by zero tolerance policies, more effective alternative strategies are available. Systemic school-wide violence prevention programs, social skills curricula and positive behavioral supports lead to improved learning for all students and safer school communities.

Resources

- ABA Zero Tolerance Policy (2001). (available
- Bear, G., Quinn, M. & Burkholder, S. (2001). Interim alternative educational settings for children with disabilities. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. (NASP ASPIIRE Project, IDEA Partnerships). Available at: www.ideapractices.org.
- NASP National Mental Health and Education Center for Children and Families-- www.naspcenter.org
- Safe and Responsive Schools Project--www.indiana.edu/~safeschl
- Skiba, R. (2000). Zero tolerance, zero evidence: An analysis of school disciplinary practice (Policy Research Report #SRS2). Bloomington, IN: Indiana Education Policy Center. (available at: www. Indiana.edu/safeschl/ztze.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Education (1997). Principal/School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Skiba R., Reynolds, C.R, Graham S., Sheras P., Conoloy J.C.,& Garicia-Vazquaz E. (2006). Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations. American Psychological Association. Washington, DC. (available at http://www.apa.org/ed/cpse/zttfreport.pdf)
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Programs

- Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) www.pbis.org
- First Step to Success, Sopris West (www.sopriswest.com)
- Positive Adolescent Choices Training (937) 775-4300
- Project ACHIEVE www.coedu.usf.edu/projectachieve
- Promoting Positive Thinking Strategies www.drp.org/paths.html
- Second Step Curriculum www.cfchildren.org