
Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?

An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations

American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force

Although there can be no dispute that schools must do all that can be done to ensure the safety of learning environments, controversy has arisen about the use of zero tolerance policies and procedures to achieve those aims. In response to that controversy, and to assess the extent to which current practice benefits students and schools, the American Psychological Association convened a task force to evaluate the evidence and to make appropriate recommendations regarding zero tolerance policies and practices. An extensive review of the literature found that, despite a 20-year history of implementation, there are surprisingly few data that could directly test the assumptions of a zero tolerance approach to school discipline, and the data that are available tend to contradict those assumptions. Moreover, zero tolerance policies may negatively affect the relationship of education with juvenile justice and appear to conflict to some degree with current best knowledge concerning adolescent development. To address the needs of schools for discipline that can maintain school safety while maximizing student opportunity to learn, the report offers recommendations for both reforming zero tolerance where its implementation is necessary and for alternative practice to replace zero tolerance where a more appropriate approach is indicated.

Keywords: zero tolerance, school discipline, school violence, school safety, evidence-based practice

There can be no doubt that schools have a duty to use all effective means needed to maintain a safe and disciplined learning environment. Beyond the simple responsibility to keep children safe, teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn in a climate marked by chaos and disruption. About this there is no controversy.

Disagreements have arisen, however, over the methods used to achieve that aim. Since the early 1990s, the national discourse on school discipline has been dominated by the philosophy of *zero tolerance*. Originally developed as an approach to drug enforcement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006), the term became widely adopted in schools in the early 1990s as a philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context. Such policies appear to be relatively widespread in America's schools, although the lack of a single definition of zero tolerance makes it difficult to estimate how prevalent such policies may be. Zero

tolerance policies assume that removing students who engage in disruptive behavior will deter others from disruption (Ewing, 2000) and create an improved climate for those students who remain (Public Agenda, 2004).

Yet abundant controversy has been created in schools and communities throughout the nation in the actual implementation of zero tolerance policies and practices. For example, as reported in the *St. Petersburg Times* ("Educational Intolerance," 2001), a 10-year-old girl found a small knife in her lunchbox placed there by the mother for cutting an apple. Although she immediately handed over the knife to her teacher, she was expelled from school for possessing a weapon. In another case, an adolescent was expelled for violating school rules by talking to his mother on a cell phone while at school—his mother was on deployment as a soldier in Iraq and he had not spoken with her in 30 days (Torpy, 2005). Such cases rankle students, their parents, and the public but are often rationalized as necessary sacrifices if zero tolerance policies are to be applied fairly and are to be effective in creating a deterrent effect.

This article is a summary of a larger report commissioned by and completed for the American Psychological Association (APA) by the APA Zero Tolerance Task Force. The Task Force members were Cecil R. Reynolds (chair; Texas A&M University), Russell J. Skiba (Indiana University), Sandra Graham (University of California, Los Angeles), Peter Sheras (University of Virginia), Jane Close Conoley (University of California, Santa Barbara), and Eneida Garcia-Vazquez (New Mexico State University). In recognition of the possible problems with current policies and the need to bring a data-based exploration into consideration of such issues, the APA Board of Directors recommended, and the APA Council of Representatives approved in June 2005, a request from the APA Division of School Psychology to appoint and fund a task force on the impact of elementary and secondary school zero tolerance policies. The full report was submitted to the Council of Representatives in February 2006 and was approved by the Board of Directors in May 2006 and by the Council of Representatives in August 2006. The full report, including appendices, citations, and tables removed from this version for reasons of space, can be accessed online at <http://www.apa.org/releases/ZTTFRptBODRevisions5-15.pdf>

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In an era of educational policy defined by accountability, it is appropriate and important to examine the extent to which any widely implemented philosophy, practice, or policy has been shown on the basis of sound research to contribute to important educational goals. Thus the American Psychological Association (APA), as part of its mission to advance health, education, and human welfare, commissioned the Zero Tolerance Task Force to examine the evidence concerning the academic and behavioral effects of zero tolerance policies. The task force examined the assumptions that underlie zero tolerance policies and all data relevant to testing those assumptions in practice, and it synthesized the evidence regarding the specific effects of exclusionary discipline on students of color and students with disabilities. Finally, the Zero Tolerance Task Force examined research pertaining to the effects of zero tolerance policies with respect to child development, the relationship between education and the juvenile justice system, and students, families, and communities. The task force's report concluded with recommendations both for reforming zero tolerance policies and for implementing alternatives in practice, policy, and research.

Findings of the Task Force

It should be noted that, although research and policy have adopted increasingly more stringent standards for judging the quality of evidence supporting the efficacy of new interventions, it remains rare that such standards are applied in order to examine preexisting educational practice. Thus, policy prescriptions regarding zero tolerance have far outrun the state of knowledge concerning its actual impact in practice. Nevertheless, the Zero Tolerance Task Force argues that it is no less important to critically evaluate the

evidence basis for existing policy and practice in order to ensure that current practices in school violence prevention are in fact reducing the likelihood of violence and disruption and improving the climate of schools. The task force applied that standard in an extensive review of the literature on zero tolerance; the following are the key findings of that review.

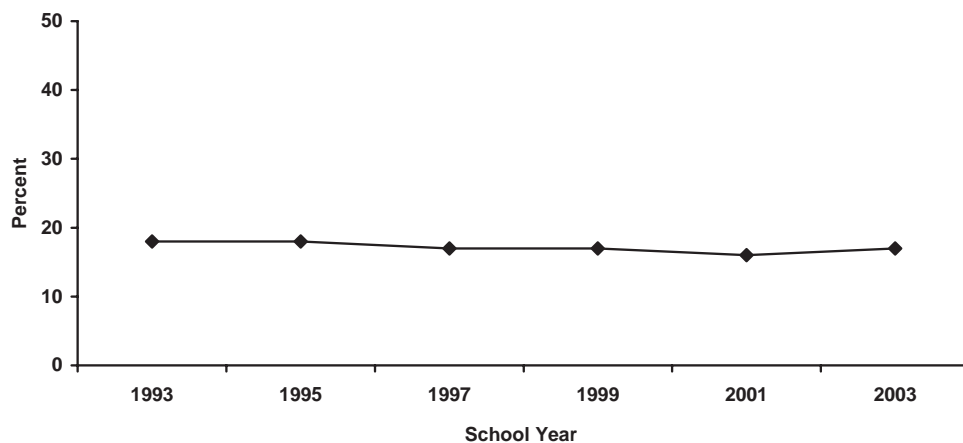
1. *Have zero tolerance policies made schools safer and more effective in handling disciplinary issues?*

We examined the data concerning the following five key assumptions of zero tolerance policies. In general, data tended to contradict the presumptions made in applying a zero tolerance approach to maintaining school discipline and order:

- **School violence is at a crisis level and increasing, thus necessitating forceful, no-nonsense strategies for violence prevention.** Although any level of violence and disruption is unacceptable in schools and must be continually addressed in education, the evidence does not support an assumption that violence in schools is out of control or increasing. Incidents of critical and deadly violence remain a relatively small proportion of school disruptions (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998), and the data have consistently indicated that school violence and disruption have remained stable, or even decreased somewhat, since approximately 1985 (DeVoe et al., 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; see Figure 1).
- **Through the provision of mandated punishment for certain offenses, zero tolerance increases the consistency of school discipline and thereby the clarity of the disciplinary message to students.**

Figure 1

Percentage of Students in Grades 9–12 Who Reported Having Been in a Physical Fight During the Previous 12 Months on School Property: 1993 to 2003



Note. Adapted from *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2004* (U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, NCES 2005-002/NCJ 205290, p. 19) by J. F. DeVoe et al., 2004, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Consistency, often defined as treatment integrity or fidelity (Lane, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004), is an important criterion in the implementation of any behavioral intervention (Patterson, Capaldi, & Bank, 1991). There is no evidence, however, that zero tolerance has increased the consistency of school discipline. Rates of suspension and expulsion vary widely across schools and school districts (Kaeser, 1979; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997), and this variation appears to be due as much to characteristics of schools and school personnel (e.g., disciplinary philosophy, quality of school governance) as to the behavior or attitudes of students (Mukuria, 2002; Raffaele-Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982).

- **Removal of students who violate school rules will create a school climate more conducive to learning for those students who remain.** A key assumption of zero tolerance policy is that the removal of disruptive students will result in a safer climate for others (Ewing, 2000). Although the assumption is strongly intuitive, data on a number of indicators of school climate have shown the opposite effect, that is, that schools with higher rates of school suspension and expulsion appear to have *less* satisfactory ratings of school climate (Bickel & Qualls, 1980), to have less satisfactory school governance structures (Wu et al., 1982), and to spend a disproportionate amount of time on disciplinary matters (Scott & Barrett, 2004). Perhaps more important, recent research indicates a negative relationship between the use of school suspension and expulsion and school-wide academic achievement, even when controlling for demographics such as socioeconomic status (J. E. Davis & Jordan, 1994; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Although such findings do not demonstrate causality, it becomes difficult to argue that zero tolerance creates more positive school climates when its use is associated with more negative achievement outcomes.
- **The swift and certain punishments of zero tolerance have a deterrent effect upon students, thus improving overall student behavior and discipline.** The notion of deterring future misbehavior is central to the philosophy of zero tolerance, and the impact of any consequence on future behavior is the defining characteristic of effective punishment (Skinner, 1953). Rather than reducing the likelihood of disruption, however, school suspension in general appears to predict higher future rates of misbehavior and suspension among those students who are suspended (Bowditch, 1993; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996). In the long term, school suspension and expulsion are moderately associated with a higher likelihood of school dropout and failure to graduate on time (Bowditch, 1993; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

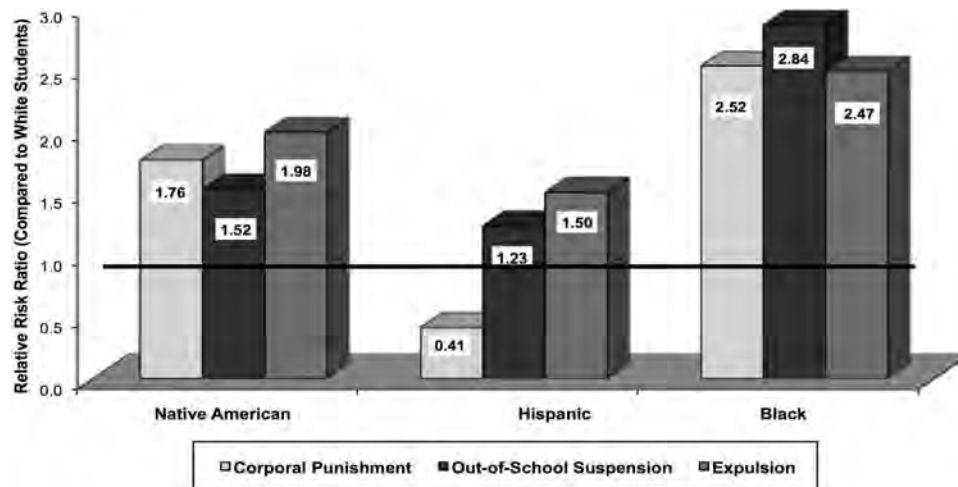
- **Parents overwhelmingly support the implementation of zero tolerance policies to ensure the safety of schools, and students feel safer knowing that transgressions will be dealt with in no uncertain terms.** The data regarding this assumption are mixed and inconclusive. Media accounts and some survey results suggest that parents and the community react strongly in favor of increased disciplinary punishments if they fear that their children's safety is at stake (Blankstein, 1999; Public Agenda, 2004). On the other hand, communities surrounding schools often react highly negatively if they perceive that students' right to an education is being threatened (A. Davis, 1999; D. Johnson, 1999). Although some students appear to make use of suspension or expulsion as an opportunity to examine their own behavior, the available evidence also suggests that students in general regard school suspension and expulsion as ineffective and unfair (Brantlinger, 1991; Sheets, 1996; Thorson, 1996).

2. What has been the impact of zero tolerance on students of color and students with disabilities?

Part of the appeal of zero tolerance policies has been the expectation that by removing subjective influences or contextual factors from disciplinary decisions, such policies would be fairer to students traditionally overrepresented in school disciplinary consequences (Casella, 2003). The evidence, however, does not support such an assumption. Rather, the disproportionate discipline of students of color continues to be a concern (see Figure 2); overrepresentation in suspension and expulsion has been found consistently for African American students (see, e.g., Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Kaeser, 1979; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Raffaele-Mendez et al., 2002; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wu et al., 1982) and less consistently for Latino students (Gordon, Della Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2003). The evidence shows that such disproportionality is not due entirely to economic disadvantage (Skiba et al., 2002; Wu et al., 1982), nor are there any data supporting the assumption that African American students exhibit higher rates of disruption or violence that would warrant higher rates of discipline. Rather, African American students may be disciplined more severely for less serious or more subjective reasons (Gregory & Weinstein, in press; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; McFadden et al., 1992; Skiba et al., 2002). Emerging professional opinion, qualitative research findings, and a substantive empirical literature from social psychology suggest that the disproportionate discipline of students of color may be due to lack of teacher preparation in classroom management (Vavrus & Cole, 2002), lack of training in culturally competent practices (Ferguson, 2001; Townsend, 2000), or racial stereotypes (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Graham & Lowery, 2004). Although there are fewer data available, students with disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioral disorders, appear to be suspended and expelled at rates disproportionate to their

Figure 2

Relative Risk Ratios of Students Experiencing Select School Discipline Indicators by Race: 2002–2003 School Year



Note. Data are national estimates from the U.S. Department of Education (2004), Office for Civil Rights 2002–2003 Elementary and Secondary School Survey. The relative risk ratio is the ratio of the target group's risk index (percentage of group subject to the consequence) compared with the risk index on the same measure for White students. A risk ratio of 1.00 indicates exact proportionality (solid line). Ratios above 1.00 indicate overrepresentation in the selected indicator, whereas ratios under 1.00 indicate underrepresentation in that indicator.

representation in the population (Leone, Mayer, Malmgren, & Meisel, 2000; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). Data are as yet insufficient for drawing any conclusions about the causes of disciplinary disproportionality for students with disabilities.

3. To what extent are zero tolerance policies developmentally appropriate as a psychological intervention, taking into account the developmental level of children and youth?

In this section, the task force considered evidence from research on adolescent development relating to the use of punishment in school. In recent years, research from a variety of disciplines has highlighted the policy implications of adolescent development for treatment of youthful offenders in the juvenile justice system (see, e.g., Grisso & Schwartz, 2001; Steinberg & Scott, 2003). Particularly before the age of 15, adolescents appear to display psychosocial immaturity in at least four areas: poor resistance to peer influence (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Zimring, 1998), attitudes toward and perception of risk (Arnett, 1992; Hooper, Luciana, Conklin, & Yarger, 2004), future orientation (Greene, 1986; Grisso et al., 2003), and impulse control (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Luna, Garver, Urban, Lazar, & Sweeney, 2004). The case for psychosocial immaturity during adolescence is also supported by evidence from developmental neuroscience indicating that the brain structures of adolescents are less well developed than previously thought (e.g., Giedd et al., 1999; Nelson, 2003; Sowell, Trauner, Gamst, & Jernigan, 2002). Findings from the field of developmental neuroscience indicate that if a particular structure of the brain is still immature, then the functions that it governs will also show immaturity (e.g.,

Baird & Fugelsang, 2004; Luna & Sweeney, 2004); that is, adolescents are more likely to take greater risks and to reason less adequately about the consequences of their behavior. Finally a growing body of developmental research indicates that certain characteristics of secondary schools often are at odds with the developmental challenges of adolescence, including the need for close peer relationships, autonomy, support from adults other than one's parents, identity negotiation, and academic self-efficacy (Eccles, 2004; Eccles & Midgley, 1989).

Used inappropriately, zero tolerance policies may exacerbate both the normative challenges of early adolescence and the potential mismatch between the adolescent's developmental stage and the structure of secondary schools. There can be no doubt that many incidents that result in disciplinary infractions at the secondary level are due to poor judgment on the part of the adolescent involved. But if that judgment is the result of developmental or neurological immaturity, *and if the resulting behavior does not pose a threat to safety*, weighing the importance of a particular consequence against the long-term negative consequences of zero tolerance policies must be viewed as a complex decision, especially since adolescents appear to be more developmentally susceptible to such lapses in judgment.

4. How has zero tolerance affected the relationship between education and the juvenile justice system?

The introduction of zero tolerance policies has affected the delicate balance between the educational and juvenile justice systems, in particular, increasing schools' use of and reliance on strategies such as security technology, security personnel, and profiling, especially in high-

minority, high-poverty school districts (T. Johnson, Boyden, & Pitz; Verdugo, 2002). Although security technology and school resource officers may be useful as part of a comprehensive approach to preventing school violence, data are currently insufficient (see, e.g., Mayer & Leone, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006) for determining whether these methods, which tend to be resource intensive, are of sufficient benefit in promoting safe schools. Zero tolerance policies may also have increased the use of profiling, a method of prospectively identifying students who may be at risk of committing violence or disruption by comparing their profiles to those of others who have engaged in such behavior in the past. Studies by the U.S. Secret Service (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (O'Toole & the Critical Incident Response Group, 2000), and researchers in the area of threat assessment (Cornell et al., 2004; Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000) have consistently found that profiles constructed to promote school safety are unreliable. Such profiles tend to overidentify students from minority populations as potentially dangerous (Dunbar & Villaruel, 2004) despite the fact that no minority students were involved in the most prominent late-1990s school shootings. Rather, best-evidence recommendations have consistently focused on the emerging technology of threat assessment, which can assist school personnel in determining the degree to which a given threat or incident constitutes a serious danger to the school (Cornell et al., 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2002).

The increased reliance on more severe consequences in response to student disruption has also resulted in an increase of referrals to the juvenile justice system for infractions that were once handled in school. The term *school-to-prison pipeline* (see, e.g., Wald & Losen, 2003) has emerged from the study of this phenomenon. Research indicates that many schools appear to be using the juvenile justice system to a greater extent and, in a relatively large percentage of cases, for infractions that would not previously have been considered dangerous or threatening (Casella, 2003). As greater numbers of students are referred to the juvenile justice system for infractions committed at school, it seems reasonable to question whether these referred youth's constitutional rights have been respected fully (Advancement Project, 2003). Although some of the apparent parallels between the educational and juvenile justice systems are compelling, the majority of research on the school-to-prison pipeline is currently anecdotal or descriptive. Longitudinal research that prospectively examines the long-term outcomes of school suspension and expulsion would be necessary to test hypothesized causal influences of disciplinary practices on juvenile justice outcomes.

5. What has been the impact—both negative and positive—of zero tolerance policies on students, families, and communities?

Although the research in this area is insufficiently rigorous or wide-ranging to justify strong statements, concern has been raised in the literature that zero tolerance policies may create, enhance, or accelerate negative mental health outcomes for youth by creating increases in student

alienation, anxiety, rejection, and breaking of healthy adult bonds (Comer & Poussaint, 1992; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004). Similarly, little research has been conducted to document the effects of zero tolerance on families or the community. Preliminary estimates suggest that the extensive use of suspension and expulsion and the increased reliance on the juvenile justice system for school misbehavior may not be cost effective. Finally, there is a strong body of evidence showing that preventing or treating delinquency and school failure are more cost effective than doing nothing or paying welfare and prison costs incurred by undereducated and alienated youth (see, e.g., Bear, Webster-Stratton, Furlong, & Rhee, 2000; Kingery, Bifora, & Zimmerman, 1996). Research is necessary to document the cost-benefit ratio associated with prevention and early intervention approaches when directly compared with zero tolerance policies.

6. Are there other disciplinary alternatives that could make a stronger contribution toward maintaining school safety or the integrity of the learning environment while keeping a greater number of students in school?

It would make little sense to conclude that zero tolerance is ineffective and needs to be modified or discontinued if in fact zero tolerance was the only option for maintaining safe school climates conducive to learning. In recent years, however, numerous research studies, as well as a number of government panels, have critically examined violence prevention strategies. The findings of both researchers (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2003; Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995) and national panels (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998; Elliott, Hatot, Sirovatka, & Potter, 2001; Mihalic, Irwin, Elliott, Fagan, & Hansen, 2001; Sherman et al., 1997) have been highly consistent in identifying a host of strategies that have demonstrated efficacy in promoting school safety and reducing the potential for youth violence. These strategies have been increasingly organized in the literature into a model of primary prevention (APA, 1993; Dwyer et al., 1998; Elliott et al., 2001; Tolan et al., 1995; H. M. Walker et al., 1996) suggesting that effective school discipline and school violence programs must include the following three levels of intervention:

- *primary prevention strategies* targeted at all students,
- *secondary prevention strategies* targeted at those students who may be at risk for violence or disruption, and
- *tertiary strategies* targeted at those students who have already engaged in disruptive or violent behavior.

Although space does not permit a thorough description of all the programs found to be effective or promising, the full task force report highlights three programs that have been shown to be effective in reducing the risk of violence or disruption: *bullying prevention* (primary; Olweus & Limber, 1999), *threat assessment* (secondary; Cornell & Sheras, 2006), and *restorative justice* (tertiary; Karp & Breslin, 2001). It is important to note that schools need to implement these programs comprehensively in order for

them to serve as effective alternatives. Implementation trials of comprehensive systems change models for school discipline such as Positive Behavioral Supports (Rosenberg & Jackman, 2003) or Safe and Responsive Schools (Skiba, Ritter, Simmons, Peterson, & Miller, 2006) have yielded promising results in terms of reductions in office referrals, school suspensions, and expulsions and improved ratings on measures of school climate. Finally, the controversy over zero tolerance and the concern that increased rates of school removal may decrease rates of achievement and engagement have led a number of state legislatures, such as Indiana, Texas, and Virginia, to propose or adopt legislation to modify zero tolerance procedures or expand the range of disciplinary options available to schools.

Recommendations

Under an evidence-based paradigm, it is incumbent upon both researchers and practitioners proposing new educational and psychological interventions to demonstrate, through a rigorous research design, the beneficial effects or positive outcomes of those practices. In the same way, we would argue that the critical lens of evidence-based evaluation should be turned on existing policy, to ensure that current practices are truly of benefit to the students and schools who are the recipients of those procedures. This is especially true when, as is the case with zero tolerance, the procedure is controversial and poses some degree of risk (e.g., lost educational opportunity for those removed from school).

Thus, it is problematic that despite 20 years of school implementation of zero tolerance policies, and nearly 15 years as federal policy, the research base on zero tolerance is in no way sufficient to evaluate the impact of zero tolerance policy and practices on student behavior or school climate. It is of even greater concern that the overwhelming majority of findings from the available research on zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline tend to contradict the assumptions of that philosophy.

The goal of any effective disciplinary system must be to ensure a safe school climate while avoiding policies and practices that may reduce students' opportunity to learn. Although the goals of zero tolerance in terms of ensuring a safe and disciplined school climate must be supported, the implementation of zero tolerance has created continuing controversy by threatening the opportunity to learn for too many students. Moreover, the Zero Tolerance Task Force's review of an extensive database on school discipline reveals that despite the removal of large numbers of purported troublemakers, zero tolerance policies have not provided evidence that such approaches can guarantee safe and productive school climates for other members of the student population. Clearly, an alternative course is necessary that can guarantee safe school environments without removing large numbers of students from the opportunity to learn.

The APA Zero Tolerance Task Force offered the following recommendations organized into categories of policy, practice, and research. It is a foundational assump-

tion that some infractions cannot be allowed in a school environment (e.g., possession of weapons or drugs at school, serious threat or assault) without seriously threatening the safety of students or the integrity of learning. Thus, some task force recommendations propose reforms of zero tolerance policies to address these types of infractions. On the other hand, many infractions do not require the severe and unbending consequences of zero tolerance. Thus, we also recommend a range of alternatives to zero tolerance policies. By offering an evidence-based and comprehensive approach to school discipline, we hope the following recommendations will help schools and communities meet the critical goal of ensuring safe school climates conducive to learning without removing students from the opportunity to learn.

A. Reforming Zero Tolerance

A.1 Practice

A.1.1 Apply zero tolerance policies with greater flexibility, taking school context and teacher expertise into account.

Just as police officers are given wide discretion in their powers of citation and arrest, especially in the case of misdemeanor offenses, professional school staff on the scene are often best equipped to appraise the circumstances and issues. Research suggests that effective principals work with their teachers to define which offenses should be referred to the office and which are better handled at the classroom level (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

A.1.2 Teachers and other professional staff who have regular contact with students should be the first line of communication with parents and caregivers regarding disciplinary incidents.

Except in the case of the most egregious rule infractions, a school administrator should not be the first person to contact caregivers about disciplinary problems at school. Regular and continuous contact about less serious behavior, or even positive interactions, is more likely to yield constructive relations between parents and schools than occasional, crisis-centered communication.

A.1.3 Carefully define all infractions, whether major or minor, and train all staff in appropriate means of handling each infraction.

Carefully drawn definitions of all behaviors as they relate to the school disciplinary code protect both students from inequitable consequences and school officials from charges of unfair and arbitrary application of school policy. Classroom management should be infused into the preparation of preservice teachers so that beginning teachers are properly equipped to handle the majority of minor classroom disruptions and to defuse rather than escalate behavioral incidents.

A.1.4 Evaluate all school discipline or school violence prevention strategies to ensure that disciplinary interventions, programs, or strategies are having a beneficial impact on student behavior and school safety.

The implementation of any procedure addressing student behavior or school violence must be accompanied by

an evaluation designed to determine whether that procedure has indeed contributed to improved school safety or student behavior. Without such data, time and resources may be wasted on strategies that sound appealing but in fact do little to decrease a school's actual rate of disruption or violence.

A.2 Policy

A.2.1 Reserve zero tolerance disciplinary removals for only the most serious and severe of disruptive behaviors.

Expulsions and long-term suspensions should be reserved for offenses that place other students or staff in jeopardy of physical or emotional harm. It is appropriate to segregate repeat offenders from the general education population to preserve the safety of the school environment, but a focus on keeping students in an active learning environment, even in a separate facility if necessary, should be maintained.

A.2.2 Replace one-size-fits-all disciplinary strategies with graduated systems of discipline, wherein consequences are geared to the seriousness of the infraction.

Although there are certain behaviors or offenses that are simply unacceptable in school settings under any circumstances, graduated discipline policies increase the efficiency of school discipline by specifying that offenses such as classroom disruption, attendance-related behaviors, or even minor fights among students are met with less severe consequences (e.g., parent contact, community service, counseling). Comprehensive, effective disciplinary policies should define a continuum of possible actions and consequences and provide guidance regarding the permissible or recommended consequences for a given severity of behavior.

A.2.3 Require school police officers who work in schools to have training in adolescent development.

Law enforcement strategies that stress punishment of offenders without understanding adolescent development run the risk of alienating youth from positive adults, thereby increasing the likelihood of maladaptive behavior (see, e.g., Casella, 2003). Thus, police officers in schools must be trained to understand that minor, developmentally influenced misbehavior should not be interpreted or dealt with as a criminal infraction.

A.3 Research

A.3.1 Develop more systematic prospective studies on the outcomes of children who are suspended or expelled from school due to zero tolerance policies.

Further research involving comprehensive longitudinal data is needed to describe how zero tolerance policies affect youth outcomes, to identify mechanisms through which district or state policy influences these outcomes, and to explore how characteristics of youth, families, and communities might mediate these relationships.

A.3.2 Expand research on the connections between the education and juvenile justice system and, in particular, empirically test the support for a hypothesized school-to-prison pipeline.

Although similarities between zero tolerance in the educational and juvenile justice systems (Casella, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003) suggest that zero tolerance policies and suspension or expulsion may accelerate youth contact with the juvenile justice system, linkages between school discipline and juvenile justice have not been sufficiently investigated. Prospective research that can explore the extent to which student disciplinary removal is related to increased likelihood of contact with juvenile justice systems is necessary in order to better understand to what extent and how these systems influence each other.

A.3.3 Conduct research at the national level on the extent to which school districts' use of zero tolerance disproportionately targets youth of color, particularly African American males.

African American youth have been found to be two to three times more likely than White youth to be suspended or expelled for school infractions, and such disparities cannot be attributed to differences in socioeconomic status or to racial/ethnic differences in rates of misbehavior. In order to support action plans to remedy disproportionate minority exclusion, research is needed that systematically documents whether zero tolerance policies in particular affect youth of color disproportionately. Moreover, a better understanding of contextual factors that may contribute to racial/ethnic disparities in school discipline is needed, including variations in classroom management and the contribution of cultural stereotypes that may operate in as yet unspecified and perhaps unconscious ways.

A.3.4 Conduct econometric studies or cost-benefit analyses designed to show the relative benefits to school climate of removing students from school compared with the costs to society of such removal.

Although available evidence suggests that frequent student removal is associated with a host of negative outcomes, it is unclear what short-term benefits the school and society may gain, or may perceive they gain, by removing certain students from school. Cost-benefit analyses could address the extent to which the potential benefits of zero tolerance outweigh the costs for schools and society in terms of student alienation, dropout, or juvenile incarceration.

B. Alternatives to Zero Tolerance

B.1 Practice

B.1.1 Implement preventive measures that can improve school climate and improve the sense of school community and belongingness.

Many of the most effective programs in the nation for dealing with student disruption are characterized by high levels of student support and community (see, e.g., Osher, Sandler, & Nelson, 2001). Solutions to the zero tolerance dilemma may seek to shift the focus from swift and certain punishment to using research-supported strategies to improve the sense of school community and belongingness.

B.1.2 Seek to reconnect alienated youth and reestablish the school bond for students at-risk for discipline problems or violence. Use threat assessment procedures to identify the level of risk posed by student words.

Connection to school is a critical factor in preventing youth violence; school alienation has been found to be a key factor in the development of both juvenile delinquency (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004) and school violence (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The evidence suggests that procedures that assess the gravity of a given threat hold greater promise than student exclusion for identifying and addressing threats to safety.

B.1.3 Develop a planned continuum of effective alternatives for those students whose behavior threatens the discipline or safety of the school.

The behaviors of the most challenging of youth can seriously disrupt school environments. Having an array of planned options, such as restorative justice, alternative programs, or community service, available to schools when disruption or violence occurs can help reduce the impact of serious disruptive behavior.

B.1.4 Improve collaboration and communication between schools, parents, law enforcement, juvenile justice, and mental health professionals in order to develop an array of alternatives for challenging youth.

The complex problems faced by disruptive youth and their families often exceed the capabilities of any single agency. System coordination approaches such as wrap-around services (J. S. Walker & Bruns, 2006), in which education, mental health, juvenile justice, and other community youth-serving agencies collaborate to develop integrated services, can significantly increase the resources available to schools to address the most serious and challenging behaviors.

B.2 Policy

B.2.1 Legislative initiatives should encourage schools and school districts to provide an array of disciplinary alternatives prior to school suspension and expulsion and, to the extent possible, increase resources to schools for implementing a broader range of alternatives, especially prevention.

Although school suspension and expulsion will continue to be part of the disciplinary resources available to schools for handling disruptive and violent behavior, and are in some cases necessary to protect students and teachers from serious disruption and violence, students who are removed from school are placed at risk for a host of negative outcomes. Programs such as Positive Behavior Supports or Bullying Prevention that assist schools in increasing their resources for addressing disruptive or violent behavior can be expected to reduce reliance on school suspension and expulsion, thus increasing students' opportunity to learn.

B.2.2 Increase training for teachers in culturally responsive classroom behavior management and instruction.

One of the most effective disciplinary strategies is to prevent the occurrence of misbehavior through effective instruction and classroom management, thereby maximizing student opportunity to learn and reducing disciplinary referrals (Brophy & Good, 1986; Jones & Jones, 2004). In particular, high overall and disproportionate rates of office

referrals suggest a need for teacher training at all levels in elements of culturally responsive classroom management and instruction (Gay, 2000; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004).

B.3 Research

B.3.1 Conduct systematic efficacy research including quasi-experimental and randomized designs to compare outcomes of programs with and without zero tolerance policies and practices.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, America's educational systems have been directed to use educational interventions that are validated as evidence-based; one must presume this accountability requirement applies to social and behavioral interventions as much as it does to academic interventions. As schools continue to reform existing disciplinary policies and practices, these changes provide abundant opportunities for case study research (Yin, 2003) and the development of more rigorous research designs over time. Ultimately quasi-experimental and randomized control trials of key interventions will enable researchers and policymakers to make stronger statements about the causal effects of zero tolerance and other forms of school discipline.

B.3.2 Increase attention to research regarding the implementation of alternatives to zero tolerance. What are the best and most logistically feasible ways to implement alternative programs in schools?

Despite a strong grounding in empirical research, it is also true that many evidence-based violence prevention strategies have yet to establish a strong record with respect to implementation (Gottfredson et al., 2000; Schoenwald & Hoagwood, 2001). Thus, increased attention must be paid to funding scale-up studies of evidence-based prevention practices to settings beyond the initial experimental setting.

B.3.3 Conduct outcome research focused on the effects and effectiveness of various approaches to school discipline, not only in terms of effects on school climate, but also for families and the long-term functioning of children.

It remains unclear to what extent different approaches to school discipline (e.g., zero tolerance policies and prevention programs) contribute to different important short- and long-term developmental outcomes for youth, families, and communities. Of critical importance for research is the generation of strong and compelling research illustrating the extent to which these and other approaches to school discipline contribute to or detract from our youth's health, safety, and opportunity for productive and meaningful participation in society.

Conclusions

The duty of schools to preserve the safety and integrity of the learning environment is incontrovertible: to preserve a safe climate, to encourage a positive and productive learning climate, to teach students the personal and interpersonal skills they will need to be successful in school and society, and to reduce the likelihood of future disruption. It is the

means to these ends that have created controversy around zero tolerance policies. Ultimately, an examination of the evidence shows that zero tolerance policies as implemented have failed to achieve the goals of an effective system of school discipline.

Although it seems intuitive that removing disruptive students from school will make schools better places for those students who remain, or that severe punishment will improve the behavior of the punished student or of those who witness that punishment, the available evidence consistently flies in the face of these beliefs. Zero tolerance has not been shown to improve school climate or school safety. Its application in suspension and expulsion has not proven an effective means of improving student behavior. It has not resolved, and indeed may have exacerbated, minority overrepresentation in school punishments. Zero tolerance policies as applied appear to run counter to our best knowledge of child development. By changing the relationship between education and juvenile justice, zero tolerance may shift the locus of discipline from relatively inexpensive actions in the school setting to the highly costly processes of arrest and incarceration. In so doing, zero tolerance policies have created unintended consequences for students, families, and communities.

The accumulated evidence points to a clear need for change in how zero tolerance policies are applied and toward the need for a set of alternative practices. These alternatives rely upon a more flexible and commonsense application of school discipline and on a set of prevention practices that have been validated in over 10 years of school violence research. Although further research is necessary to understand how best to implement such alternatives, current evidence clearly suggests that research-based prevention practices hold a great deal more promise than zero tolerance for reaching our shared goals of safe schools and productive learning environments. It is time to make the shifts in policy, practice, and research needed to implement policies that can keep schools safe and preserve the opportunity to learn for all students.

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