Research Brief

Zero Tolerance: Advantages and Disadvantages

Question: What are the positives and negatives of zero tolerance? What should be considered when examining a school's program?

Summary of Findings:

Background

        One of the influences from the Reagan years has been the concept of zero tolerance, which was originally designed so that the criminal justice system could severely punish those involved in drugs. From there, the idea of zero tolerance found its way into schools with the passage of the Federal Gun-Free Schools of 1994, which stated that there would be no acceptance of the presence of firearms on school sites and anyone who brought one onto campus would automatically receive a one-year expulsion and be referred to the local law enforcement agency (American Bar Association, 2001; Boylan, 2002; California Department of Education; Skiba, 2000). In addition, each district's chief academic officer was given the freedom to modify expulsions on a case-by-case basis. Following the events at Columbine in 1999, zero tolerance policies were expanded to include:

- possession of anything that could be perceived as a weapon
- possession and/or use of drugs and/or alcohol on the site
- make and/or create sexually harassing/suggestive comments and/or situations
- make threats of violence in any form (i.e. writing, speaking, etc.)
- possession and/or use of laser pointers (American Bar Association, 2001; Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vazquez, 2006; Skiba, 2000).

Definitions

        Although there are no definitive definitions of zero tolerance, two commonly used ones are as follows: "Zero tolerance means that a school will automatically and severely punish a student for a variety of infractions" (American Bar Association, 2001); and The U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement defined zero tolerance as: "A policy that mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses" (Burk).

Advantages and Disadvantages

There are different points-of-view about the value of and impact of zero-tolerance policies. The following summarizes the most significant findings.

Positives

- School security programs tend to be more comprehensive and have many security provisions built into them.
- Parents report that they believe their children are not in jeopardy. Regardless of where a child goes to school, the behavior expectations are the same.
- There does not seem to be a difference in the level of school violence in schools with and without metal detectors.

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Negatives
- A strict zero tolerance policy has a "one size fits all" approach and doles out the same mandatory punishment for bringing a plastic knife to school as bringing a gun to school. The research is rife with examples of students who inadvertently or unknowingly brought something that could be construed as a weapon to school (i.e. a gun that the parent left in the car from a weekend of hunting, etc.) and were expelled.
- Students when expelled, can be denied educational opportunities and be put at greater risk for becoming a drop out because they may never be able to catch up academically.
- Students, when not in school, tend to have higher delinquency rates, exhibit more physical aggression and use more illegal drugs.
- Students of color have higher suspension rates and for less severe issues than those who are Caucasian.
- Students who come from high to moderate income levels have lower suspension rates and for more severe issues than those from low income areas, who have higher suspension rates for less severe rule infractions.
- There is little evidence to support that suspensions improve student behavior.
- Schools with higher suspension rates tend to have higher rates of misbehavior, a lower sense of satisfaction with the school climate and governance, and spend a large portion of time on discipline (American Bar Association, 2001; Boylan, 2002; California Department of Education; National Department for Educational Statistics, 2007; Skiba, 2002; Skiba, et.al. 2006).

Considerations
   The American Bar Association (2001) states that schools "…must be able to ensure a safe school climate without threatening students' opportunities to learn.". According to the research, schools with a progressive disciplinary program that is perceived as fair, firm and consistent, tend to have higher student satisfaction rates with fewer suspensions and expulsions, than those where these responses are not present (Boylan, 2002; Burke). Items to consider when examining a school's program:
- all stakeholders should be involved in the development of the Code of Conduct
- examine data, i.e. suspension and expulsion rates, who are creating problems, are the punishments fair and equitable? Are the punishments bringing about the desired results?
- define school rules and infractions in sequence from minor to most severe
- determine if the infractions are fair and developmentally appropriate
- infuse preventative measures
- use removal of students for the most serious and dangerous behaviors
- determine supports for students so they do not fall behind academically (i.e. tutoring, alternative school placements, phase back into school, in-school programs, etc.)
- provide on-going teacher training and staff development especially in the areas of classroom management and the cultures of the students
- open up lines of communication with law enforcement, mental health agencies, community, and parents
- monitor, assess and revise the new program regularly (Boylan, 2002; Burk; National School Safety and Security Services; Skiba, 2000; Skiba, et. al. 2006).

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Online Resources:

- American Bar Association. (2001). Zero tolerance policy. Retrieved online from
  http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/zerotolreport.html
  Explanations of zero tolerance in schools are provided in this article.

- Axtman, K. (2005, March 31). Why tolerance is fading for zero tolerance in schools. Christian Science
  Monitor. Retrieved online from http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0331/p01s03-ussc.html
  A brief narrative of zero tolerance and its lack of effectiveness are given in this piece.

- Boylan, E. M. (2002). Advocating for reform of zero tolerance student discipline policies: Lessons from
  the field. Retrieved online from
  http://www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/Publications/PDF/AdvocatingReform_ZeroTolerance.pdf
  A comprehensive look at zero tolerance policies and examples of cases from New Jersey are presented in
  this piece, which also includes important considerations when establishing school discipline policies.

- Burk, I. (n.d.) Zero tolerance. Guidance Channel Ezine. Retrieved online from
  http://www.guidancechannel.com/default.aspx?M=a&index=1134&cat=7
  This is a brief description of items that need to be considered when developing a code of conduct and
  school policies.

- California Department of Education. (n.d.) Zero tolerance. Retrieved online from
  http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/zerotolerance.asp
  An overview of California's law and suggestions for its implementation are presented.

- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2007). Indicators of school crime and safety. Retrieved online
  from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2007/
  The site provides brief narratives and ample statistics on the number of reported disciplinary actions
  taken in the nation's schools. The most recent numbers are from 2005-2006.

- National School Safety and Security Services. (n.d.) Zero tolerance. Retrieved online from
  http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/zero_tolerance.html
  A short description of zero tolerance and what needs to be considered in policies are provided in this
  piece. It also includes a variety of trainings that are available from this group.

- Skiba, R. J. (2000, August). Zero tolerance. Zero evidence. Indiana Policy Center. Retrieved online from
  http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/ztze.pdf

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An in-depth article on the effects of zero tolerance are explored. Although it is older, it has many invaluable insights to consider when examining this policy.

- Skiba, R., Reynolds, C. R., Graham, S., Sheras, P., Conoley, J. C., & Garcia-Vazquez, E. (2006, February). Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations. APA Zero Tolerance Task Force. Retrieved online from http://www.pbismaryland.org/documents/Are%20Zero%20Tolerance%20policies%20effective%20 APA%20Board%20report%20June%202006.pdf
  This is an extensive report on research conducted on zero tolerance policies. It provides a comprehensive list of suggestions and ideas to make this policy more effective and useful.

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http://www.principalspartnership.com/

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