

Zero Tolerance: Safer Schools or Unfair Rules?

Many U.S. schools have adopted zero-tolerance policies in the belief they will make schools safer. Are they delivering on their promise? *By Sean McCollum*



Zero Tolerance Makes Schools Safer

"IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE A PLACE where young people can learn and be safe," said Nellie Meyer, principal of Clairemont High School in San Diego. "We have real strict policies that prohibit weapons and drugs on campus."

Zero tolerance, the policy that was designed to forestall violence in U.S. schools, grew out of several violent incidents in the 1990s, capped by the shocking 1999 shootings at Colorado's Columbine High School. Those killings produced widespread support for zero tolerance and other "get-tough" programs designed to keep another such tragedy from occurring. "If you have a weapon, you will be expelled," explains Meyer about the weapons policy at Clairemont High. "We have to be that firm on something that dangerous."

OR

Zero Tolerance Does More Harm Than Good

RACHEL KIEL, 15, ADMITS SHE MESSED UP LAST February. Having found a marijuana cigarette, the Illinois ninth-grader jokingly showed it to some friends. (She later tested negative for any kind of drug use, her mother says.) She was caught with it and arrested, then suspended, then expelled until January 2005 under Thornton Fractional North High School's zero-tolerance policy. But this honor student with no history of trouble doubts she'll ever go back; she may choose home-schooling instead.

"I've lost a lot of friends and the trust of other people," Rachel told *LC*. "It's just not fair the way I've been treated. I feel like I've been branded."

The zero-tolerance goal of creating safe schools is a noble one, but in many districts the policy is getting twisted. Horror stories abound: the Wisconsin sixth-grader suspended for a year for bringing a kitchen knife to school for a sci-

According to the National School Safety Center, zero tolerance for weapons on school grounds has produced results. During the 1992-93 school year, there were 56 violent deaths in U.S. schools. By 2001-2002, that number had dropped to five. And the number of expulsions for weapons has also dropped since 1999, reports the National Center for Education Statistics, indicating that the rules are having a deterrent effect. A 2001 Associated Press poll found that more than 80 percent of Americans supported zero-tolerance policies.

To make schools even safer, some districts have expanded zero-tolerance rules to cover drug possession and violent and threatening behavior. Such dangerous disruptions have no place in schools. Rule-abiding students deserve safe, drug-free environments in which to pursue their studies. Classmates with problems need to be removed and given the help they need.

Enforcement of zero-tolerance policies has sometimes led to absurd punishments. But, this is, in part, a nod toward

fairness: No matter who breaks a zero-tolerance rule—honor student or slacker—the punishment is clear and severe, no excuses.

The news media often make a big deal when these policies result in a ridiculous punishment, like the case of the 11-year-old Florida boy taken away in handcuffs for drawing a violent picture. But how do you measure the success of zero tolerance? You won't see any news reports about the guns and drugs students *don't* bring to school because they know the consequences.

Like any new strategy, zero tolerance needs ongoing review and improvements. Schools must clearly—and frequently—explain the policy to students and teachers. Administrators must apply the policy fairly and with common sense, giving accused students “due process” to explain what happened. And school districts need to provide services and counseling to help suspended and expelled kids get back on the right track, because we all make mistakes.



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ence project; an 8-year-old facing expulsion for carrying a fingernail clipper; a high-school junior charged with “verbal abuse” and expelled for sharing with friends his essay ridiculing the principal.

Too often, zero-tolerance policies severely punish students without considering their history or intent. A student who accidentally brings a pocketknife to school is treated the same as someone carrying a gun. And often, the accused is suspended or expelled without a chance to explain the story or question the accuser.

Many experts now question the effectiveness of zero tolerance. “Schools are not checking to find out whether these policies are actually working,” Howard Hastings claims. Hast-



6
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ings, whose son was expelled for a zero-tolerance violation, is a spokesman for the organization End Zero Tolerance. “As yet, no school can show that implementation of zero tolerance has actually made the school environment safer,”

he told *LC*. Hastings cites six studies that show little change in student safety. A 2002 report by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice indicates bullying in schools is on the rise.

One high-profile study—“The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools?”—comments that students’ getting the zero-tolerance message “may be less important than the reassurance that sending [the message] provides to administrators, teachers, and parents.”

School safety is of course vital. But zero tolerance is not delivering on its promise say critics, and it is ruining the educational hopes of a growing number of students in the U.S.

>> Your Turn! List the facts and quotations used in each side of the debate. Then write your own opinion using them to support your position.