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American Psychological Association Report Challenges School Zero Tolerance Policies and Recommends Restorative Justice

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A report issued by the American Psychological Association (APA) at their summer 2006 annual meeting found that zero tolerance policies in use throughout U.S. school districts have not been effective in reducing violence or promoting learning in school. The report called for a change in these policies and indicated a need for alternatives, including restorative practices such as restorative justice conferences.

The report was written by an APA task force, led by Cecil R. Reynolds, Ph.D., of Texas A&M University, which was charged with reviewing the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies in American schools. In essence, the report found that "zero tolerance has not been shown to improve school climate or school safety."

Although it seems intuitive that removing disruptive students from schools will improve the school experience for others and that severe punishment will improve the behavior of both the punished and those who witness the punishment, the task force report asserts that the available evidence "consistently flies in the face of these beliefs."

Indeed, the task force found that zero tolerance policies may have actually increased disciplinary problems and dropout rates in middle and secondary schools, exacerbated the problem of over-representation of minority and emotionally disabled students in school discipline systems, and generated inappropriate consequences for younger children.

Zero tolerance-based punishments such as suspension and expulsion, the task force found, have not improved

behavior or academic performance. In addition, by shifting the locus of discipline from schools to the juvenile justice system, zero tolerance policies are causing numerous adverse consequences for students, families and communities.



Joseph Roy, former principal of Springfield Township High School, now Springfield Township School District superintendent, in Pennsylvania, USA, utilizes restorative practices to build a positive school community.

Zero tolerance policies requiring suspension from school were found to be counterproductive on many levels: "School suspension in general appears to predict higher future rates of misbehavior and suspension among those students who are suspended."

Schools with higher rates of school suspension and expulsion had less satisfactory school climate ratings and school governance structures, and tended to spend a disproportionate amount of time on discipline. In the long term, school suspension and expulsion were associated with a higher school-dropout rate and failure to graduate on time.

As to academic performance, the report saw "a negative relationship between the use of school suspension and

THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (APA), in Washington, D.C., is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States and is the world's largest association of psychologists. APA's membership includes more than 150,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 54 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 60 state, territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance psychology as a science, as a profession and as a means of promoting health, education and human welfare. (From the APA website.)

expulsion and school-wide academic achievement."

Regarding the notion that zero tolerance policies might be fairer to "students traditionally over-represented in school disciplinary consequences," the task force found that the opposite seemed to be true. Under zero tolerance policies: "the disproportionate discipline of students of color continues to be a concern and may be increasing; over-representation in suspension and expulsion has been found consistently for African American students and less consistently for Latino students." Furthermore, the study found that under zero tolerance policies, "African American students may be disciplined more severely for less serious or more subjective reasons."

Concerning students with disabilities, although there is less data available on this issue, the report found that, under zero tolerance policies, "students with disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioral disorders, appear to be

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suspended and expelled at rates disproportionate to their representation in the population.”

The task force found these policies to be particularly inappropriate for younger pupils. “Zero tolerance policies as applied appear to run counter to our best knowledge of child development,” the report states, adding, “Zero tolerance policies can exacerbate both the normative challenges of early adolescence and the potential mismatch between the adolescent’s developmental stage and the structure of secondary schools.”

Regarding how zero tolerance policies have affected the relationship between education and the juvenile justice system, the task force found that the policies have increased the use of security technology, security personnel and profiling. However, it found no evidence that such programs result in safer schools or more satisfactory school climates.

Moreover, the task force found that zero tolerance policies have increased referrals to the juvenile justice system for infractions that were once handled in schools, resulting in the creation of a “school-to-prison pipeline.” And since it costs more to handle a child through the juvenile justice system than within the school system, said the report, “To the extent that school infractions lead to increased contact with the juvenile justice system, the cost of treatment appears to escalate dramatically.”

The task force expressed concern that zero tolerance policies, by increasing “student shame, alienation, rejection, and breaking of healthy adult bonds,” exacerbate negative mental-health outcomes for youth.

Further, the task force found little confirmation that zero tolerance has provided any positive effects for families or communities, and “no evidence indicating that the policies themselves have assisted parents ... or that family

units have been strengthened” through the use of the policies:

“As zero tolerance policies by nature do not provide guidance or instruction because they focus directly on punishment, such actions often are seen as unjust and may breed distrust of adult authority figures and nurture adversarial confrontational attitudes.

“By subjecting students to automatic punishments that do not take into account extenuating or mitigating circumstances, zero tolerance policies represent a lost moment to teach children respect and a missed chance to inspire their trust of authority figures.”

As an alternative to zero tolerance, the task force recommends “a meaningful approach to school discipline ... one that treats students and their families with respect throughout the process, seeks to learn from students and to nurture their learning and growth as human beings and that finds ways to bring students more deeply into the school community and the surrounding community as well.” To that end, the task force advocates improving collaboration and communication between schools, parents, law enforcement personnel and jurisdictions, and juvenile justice and mental-health professionals. According to the task force, these groups need to work together to develop effective alternatives for students who challenge the disciplinary rules.

The report suggests alternatives to zero tolerance policies, including restorative practices such as restorative justice conferences, to prevent violence and increase the sense of school safety.

The report defines restorative justice (RJ) as “a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behavior.” RJ programs, the report states, “involve a cooperative process that 1) identifies crime and attempts to repair its damage, 2) includes all stakeholders to respond to acts of

violence and 3) changes the traditional relationship between the offenders and the victims.” In contrast to zero tolerance policies, RJ is “designed to reconcile the perpetrators with the victims, creating a feeling of resolution and increasing a sense of safety.”

Restorative justice, asserts the report, “makes a contribution to a stronger school climate by increasing student understanding of existing rules, and trust in the enforcement of those rules.” The report also affirmed that RJ has “yielded promising results in terms of reductions in office referrals, school suspensions and expulsions, and improved ratings on measures of school climate.” Explained the report, “By reducing the likelihood of retribution or repeat offending, restorative justice may prevent the escalation of violence.”

“Zero tolerance has not been shown to improve school climate or school safety.”

—APA Task Force Report

“Restorative justice programs attempt to re-establish positive relationships with adults and ‘teach’ understanding and empathy to those who have been violent,” the report commented, adding, “Restorative and community justice programs in the school setting prioritize activities that try to reduce delinquency and find solutions to delinquent behavior and build a community capacity to respond to problem behavior without resorting to the criminal justice system and to create a safe and supportive learning environment that effectively expresses the values of the culture.” The report concluded, “Emerging data suggest that restorative justice programs may represent a promising alternative to zero tolerance.”

To read the APA task force report, please go to: <http://www.apa.org/ed/cpse/zttfreport.pdf>. ☉