

# Restoring Justice to Education: Lessons Learned from a Middle School Pilot Project

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# Discipline in South Carolina: The School-to-Prison Pipeline

- Zero Tolerance
  - Predetermined consequences for noncompliance with mandatory behavior. Removes discretionary discipline decisions from teachers and administrators. Most common consequences are exclusionary (i.e., suspension and expulsion).
- Disturbing Schools Statute
  - Section 16-17-420 makes it unlawful for any person “to interfere with or disturb in any way or in any place the students or teachers of any school...to loiter about the premises or to act in an obnoxious manner thereon...”

# Where Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools Have Brought Us

## South Carolina

- In South Carolina 7% of White students and 19% of Black students were suspended from school in 2007
- Only 19% of Black 8<sup>th</sup> graders were reading at grade level, compared to 46% of White 8<sup>th</sup> graders
- South Carolina spends more than twice as much per prisoner as per public school student

## Nationally (United States)

- Suspension/expulsion, academic failure, and dropping out from school are all predictors of future involvement in the criminal justice system
- In the U.S., Black children are 50% more likely than White children to drop out of school
- In the U.S., a Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime

## 5 Key Assumptions of Zero Tolerance Policies

- School violence is at a serious level and increasing, thus necessitating forceful, no-nonsense strategies
  - Serious and deadly violence remain a relatively small portion of school disruptions, and the data have consistently indicated that school violence has remained stable, or even decreased somewhat, since approximately 1985
- 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
  - Rates of suspension and expulsion vary widely across schools and school districts – and this variation appears to be due as much to characteristics of the schools and school personnel as to the behavior or attitudes of students
- Removal of students who violate school rules will create a school climate more conducive to learning for those students who remain
  - Indicators of school climate have shown the exact opposite effect – schools with higher rates of suspension/expulsion have less satisfactory ratings of school climate and have lower rates of academic achievement even after controlling for demographics such as socioeconomic status

## 5 Key Assumptions of Zero Tolerance Policies (cont.)

- The swift and certain punishments of zero tolerance have a deterrent effect upon students, thus improving overall student behavior
  - School suspension actually predicts higher future rates of misbehavior and suspension among those students who are suspended and is associated with a higher likelihood of school dropout
- 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
  - Data on this assumption are mixed and inconclusive

Researchers have found that certain school characteristics are more predictive of academic failure, suspension, and dropout than are student characteristics or behaviors:

- Undesirable physical condition of school
- Infrequent adult-student interactions
- Few instructional strategies used by teachers
- Low expectations for student success among faculty
- Negative perceptions of the school climate by faculty/staff
- Negative perceptions of family involvement

# School Connectedness :

- Protects children with early aggression from continuing on in violence 2 years later
- Protects children with numerous environmental risks from violent and nonviolent offending
- Acts as a protective factor against substance abuse, emotional distress (including suicide attempts), and school absenteeism
- Predicts higher academic achievement and school completion
- Is lower in schools with a harsh and punitive discipline climate

American Bar Association  
American Psychological Association (Zero Tolerance  
Task Force)  
American Academy of Pediatrics

- Each conducted independent studies of zero tolerance policies in schools
- Each concluded that these policies fail to make schools safer and are more detrimental than advantageous
- Each called for the end of reliance on zero tolerance, and specifically for limiting suspensions/expulsions to only the most egregious circumstances (e.g., when schools can demonstrate that these punishments are the only way to prevent the student from harming self or others)
- Each recommended the development of alternative discipline practices that are individualized, that demonstrate the ability to correct (micro level) and deter (macro level) student misconduct, and that minimize the disruption to the students' educational process

# Restorative Interventions:

- Recognize the purposes of misbehavior
- Address the needs of those harmed
- Work to put right the harm
- Aim to improve the future
- Seek to heal
- Use collaborative processes

## Alcorn Middle School Restorative Practices Pilot Project

- School was selected based on high suspension rates, risk factors of students, and attitude/cooperation of Principal
- Four Restorative Practitioners (16 hours/week each): University of South Carolina MSW students with previous experience working with adolescents
- 40 hours training in restorative practices prior to beginning work with students
- Manual: Hopkins, B (2004). Just schools: A whole school approach to restorative justice. Jessica Kinsley, London.

## Lessons Learned

- The Principal is your friend
- Ask for everything at the beginning (minimum commitments regarding training of teachers/admins./staff, use of circles in classrooms, conferencing procedures for disciplinary matters, access to school data, etc.), be specific, and put it in writing
- The students will be less resistant than the adults in the school
- The practitioners need to be confident and engaging (and not just with the students)
- Identify allies, focus on them first, and then ask them to recruit others for you
- Persistence pays off

If you have questions later...

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