

Dana Bunnett: It's time to rethink zero-tolerance suspensions as punishment in schools

By Dana Bunnett

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There was a time when being suspended from school brought to mind a kid from the "Blackboard Jungle" who flashed a switchblade in class. But in today's era of zero tolerance, thousands of students now are routinely suspended for such commonplace offenses as violating the school dress code. In 2011, about half of the 19,000 suspensions in Santa Clara County public schools were not for serious incidents involving violence or drugs. Those suspensions translated to thousands of hours that students missed being in school, learning.

For example, I know a special-education student who in eighth grade had 18 days of suspension within four months. Some of his less serious offenses were swearing, kicking a chair and storming out of class. It is difficult to see how sending this boy home improved his behavior, made the school safer or helped anyone succeed. Rather than being shown zero tolerance, he needed to learn in school how to control his behavior. Plus, every time he was sent home, the school lost state funding.

Get-tough zero-tolerance policies became popular in the aftermath of horrific school shootings, such as Columbine. However, the research doesn't back up the effectiveness of this approach. The National Center for School Engagement, dedicated to ensuring success in school for at-risk youth, has not found any evidence that zero tolerance works -- only myths:

Myth: School violence is at a crisis level. The data show that violence on and off campuses has decreased steadily since the early 1990s.

Myth: Zero tolerance means all children are treated equally. In fact, recent studies have shown that zero-tolerance policies are applied more frequently to low-income and minority children.

Myth: Removal of problem students improves the learning environment. False. Even when controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status, higher suspension rates are associated with lower schoolwide academic achievement and standardized test scores.

Myth: Zero tolerance has a deterrent effect. Also false. When students are suspended, there is an increased likelihood that they will receive additional suspensions. Studies show a link between a single suspension and engagement in the juvenile justice system.

Still, educators are under enormous pressure to keep schools safe and classrooms productive, so how do they do that? In a recent report, ChildTrends describes many effective alternatives. The Reconnecting Youth program uses weekly exercises for at-risk youth to foster better listening skills and ways to resolve conflicts constructively. Character education programs, such as Connect with Kids, also have proven results.

Initiatives such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provide another approach to discipline that's worked around the country. PBIS uses information about school trouble-zones and then custom-fashions a solution, as one grade school did to address frequent student meltdowns at the end of the daily lunch period. The school's administrators set up a game room with chess and checker boards that was open during lunch time, and behavior improved dramatically.

In Santa Clara County, there are low-cost resources to implement positive behavioral interventions, and seven districts already are doing so. This may be the reason there were 1,145 fewer school suspensions from 2010 to 2011.

Withholding learning is not a good way to maintain classroom effectiveness or improve student behavior. It is time for our schools to re-examine zero-tolerance suspension policies and find ways to keep more students in school. If we have the will to do this, the resources are available.

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