Zero Tolerance Policies: Ineffective Discipline Pushing Students Out of School

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Students in Southwest Detroit have sighted problems with the harsh discipline policies in their schools that are a product of zero tolerance. Zero tolerance is a policy that was developed in order to protect students while in school, however the policy is pushing students out of schools and depriving them of their education. The purpose of this research is to further understand the effects of zero tolerance on Southwest Detroit high school students. The findings suggest that students are concerned discipline is unclear and that their schools are not supporting them or preparing them for their futures. Proposed recommendations include the formation of peer juries and the involvement of students in the decision-making process.

Two West Bloomfield High School girls fight on school grounds and as a result are sent to the principal’s office. The students are allowed to explain what occurred and are referred to conflict mediation. The discipline includes no suspension, no expulsion, and no police involvement. Two Southwestern High School girls are late entering school one morning and are stopped along with numerous other students, handcuffed together, and taken to the Police Department Gang Squad for truancy. The girls are not given a chance to explain why they are late and the final result is a one-day suspension. While these are extreme examples, there does appear to be a lack of clarity and uniformity present in discipline arising from zero tolerance policies.

Zero Tolerance: What is it?

Zero tolerance was intended to create an educational environment in which certain behavior will not be tolerated, punishment will be uniform and students will be able to learn safely [1]. Unfortunately, the effects of zero tolerance have not matched these intentions and instead are detrimental to many students, pushing them out of school and denying them their right to an education [2].

Zero tolerance began in schools as early as 1989, as a term used to explain the mandated expulsion of any student based on violence, drugs or weapons [1]. As the concept was adopted by more schools as a form of discipline, it was adapted to include suspensions and a larger range of offenses including smoking and school disruption. When the Gun Free Schools Act was passed by the Clinton Administration in 1994, zero tolerance was the key issue. This act mandated that any student caught with a firearm must be expelled for one full school year [1]. Schools that did not comply would lose a portion of their federal funding [3]. But while zero tolerance began as Congress’ response to a gun problem in schools, currently the policy is used infrequently to expel students for actual firearms offenses and is widely used for minor infractions [1].

Zero Tolerance in Michigan Public Schools: How do we measure up?

Michigan is one of the most extreme states when it comes to zero tolerance and mandatory expulsions. Michigan has added drugs, alcohol, disobedience, assault, vandalism and verbal threats as offenses that allow for expulsion [3]. During the 1999-2000 academic school year, more than 3,600 students were expelled from Michigan schools in accordance with zero tolerance policies [3]. These policies also create many disparities in the rates at which students are expelled. African-American students are expelled at 2.4 times the rate of other students and Latinos are expelled 1.4 times the rate in comparison to the general student population [3]. The discrepancy transcends race to include gender, as 65% of students expelled are male while males make up just 51.2% of the student population in Michigan. While zero tolerance calls for uniform
punishments, Michigan’s statistics force one to consider if other factors play a role in whether students are suspended.

Making Changes—What are people doing to combat zero tolerance issues?

Numerous organizations across the nation are discovering that excluding children from schools is not the answer and are taking action. School districts like the Chicago Public Schools have adapted Peer Juries in their schools, giving students a voice in discipline, to combat the rising numbers of expulsions seen in the school district [4]. Generation Y, the grassroots organization run on Chicago’s Southeast side, has been researching the reasons students are pushed out of school, finding that 63% of students were suspended for non-violent, non-drug related behavior, and 30% were suspended for attendance-related behaviors. Youth from this organization desired their voices to be heard and initiated the movement for peer juries.

Sighting a similar problem in their Southwest Detroit community, the youth-led organization, Youth United, is following in this movement for quality education at better schools. The organization has already begun collecting surveys to find out why students are being suspended and is currently working with the Student Advocacy Center in Ann Arbor, MI to find ways to reform the policies that have been pushing them out of their schools.

Conducting Research—The need for more information

Youth United discovered the need for more research through involvement with the community. A comparative study was conducted between the Southwest Detroit schools targeted for change and schools located within the Detroit suburbs that are consistently ranked among the nation’s best. A survey designed for students, teachers, and administrators was administered at these school districts concerning discipline procedures and clarity of discipline, school support and atmosphere, and the student’s preparation for the future.

The survey and additional interviews were conducted with the objective and hope of gaining a better understanding of the situation in Southwest Detroit by comparing it to other school systems. The key issues pertinent to Southwest Detroit schools and their students needed to be identified in order to be resolved. Unifying themes that pertain to all of Michigan’s public schools are also identified and their resolutions discussed.

Finding #1: Discipline Procedures are Unclear

Through eight one-hour interview sessions with teachers and students from Southwest Detroit, West Bloomfield, MI and Birmingham, MI, it was discovered that discipline procedures are unclear to students and teachers across all three districts, regardless of school ranking or prestige. It appears that while West Bloomfield and Birmingham have clear Codes of Conduct with straightforward rules and accompanying punishments for breaking these rules, students still feel that enforcement of this discipline is neither fair nor uniform. In response to a question concerning how to improve discipline in her school, a Birmingham student felt her school “should be more consistent. They’re hypocritical about things and very subjective; they don’t treat everyone the same.” According to a Chadsey student in Southwest Detroit, “Everyone should have the same rules, some teachers just slack on students. Just because they know that student, the student shouldn’t get away with stuff.” Students do not perceive discipline as fair and are concerned with administrators’ objectivity. Students do not know the disciplinary policy or how and when it will be enforced.

It is here that Southwest Detroit schools lag behind. According to a Southwestern student, “There are just too many people involved in the process—they need someone in charge, not power for everyone. I was suspended by the athletic director who wasn’t even there at the time I supposedly did something wrong.” When asked the specifics of what happens when you commit certain infractions, Southwest Detroit students replied with varying answers characterized by responses repeatedly including the phrases, “I don’t know” and “It depends on the teacher and how they feel.”

Finding #2: Students in Southwest Detroit Lack the Support They Need from Their Schools.

As an effect of the preceding finding, students in Southwest Detroit do not feel supported by their schools as compared to students in other school districts. Both the Birmingham and West Bloomfield students claimed to feel very supported by their schools, pointing to policies such as the freedom to start student groups and the many assemblies created to help them as students. Students in Southwest Detroit feel the opposite, with responses such as, “I
don’t think they really care,” and “They don’t support me at all! They suspend me all the time!” One student from Chadsey felt that the school only supports those felt to be the “good students, the ones they think will succeed, they don’t push anyone else, and other students just don’t really get the chance.” Support by one’s school seems to be an indicator of success and a lack of support appears to lead to a student body that is unmotivated to succeed.

Finding #3: Students in Southwest Detroit Feel Their School is not Preparing Them for Their Future.

Lastly, students in Southwest Detroit schools, in comparison with other area schools, do not feel their school is preparing them for their future. As a Southwestern student puts it, “The school isn’t preparing me, the school days are just sloppy, some teachers are good, but most just write stuff on the board and tell you, do that.” Students in Southwest Detroit do not feel they are offered the classes they need to prepare for or succeed in their futures either, while a Birmingham student can boast, “Yes, we’re prepared for our futures, we are a big college prep school.”

The Findings—How does it all add up?

Harsh zero tolerance policies appear to be unclear and are not uniformly enforced, leaving students to feel confused and not supported by their schools. Students do not feel they can fight these unfair punishments because of the lack of support. Southwest Detroit students who do not feel their school is preparing them for their futures are at a disadvantage to suburban students who are supported and have college as a goal that is supported fully by the school. Students from both West Bloomfield and Birmingham claimed desires of college were what kept them out of trouble because they did not want their record to have bad marks. Meanwhile Southwest Detroit students fall through the cracks, and as a punishment, they are pushed even farther out of school by disciplinary actions that leave marks on their records, making future options even fewer. Students have a right to be educated, and to obtain the best understanding of the current situation, it is imperative that administrators seek ideas from students to improve the schools.

Recommendations for Better Public Schools in Southwest Detroit

Like Chicago Public Schools, Southwest Detroit needs to implement Peer Juries in their schools to involve students in the disciplinary process and give students a voice and a feeling of control and involvement in their education. However, when approached with this idea, even though students felt excited at the idea of their involvement in discipline, they were again worried that it would not be fair. But according to Jeremy Lahoud the coordinator of Generation Y in Chicago, “Peer juries are important because they put discipline back in the hands of young people, changing the way discipline works. Peer jury is a place where students can go, because even when the rules are clearly spelled out, you get cases sometimes that don’t need punishment. Sometimes, punishment just doesn’t get at the root issue. You keep enough jurors so you don’t have to sit on a jury if it’s your friend but really, it’s not about the guilt or the innocence. It’s not a trial, it’s a chance to tell your side, and work to find the solution.”

In Conclusion—Listen to the Students

Students need to be involved in disciplinary reforms. The policy and benefit of zero tolerance needs to be clarified and punishments uniformly distributed. Students and the whole community need to be involved in the creation of a better, clearer and more useful code of conduct. This code of conduct then needs to be implemented by the very people who created it—the students—through peer juries. The schools need to be reformed in a manner that will be successful in keeping kids in school, supporting them, involving them, and allowing them to become the successful people they desire to be.

References

Suggested Readings
Gordon, R. Piana L, & Keleher T. Facing the Consequences: An Examination of Racial Discrimination in U.S. Public Schools. ERASE Initiative.


**About the Author**
Kelly Alexander is a senior in the Honors Psychology Program at the University of Michigan. She is currently doing research in Social Psychology on the identity of the self and different roles have and how they effect and impact each other. She is also doing an honors thesis in Clinical and Developmental Psychology, where she conducts interview play sessions with internationally adopted children and codes these sessions to determine the children’s attachment strategies. Kelly is interested in pursuing a PhD in School Psychology, and interned with Youth United in Southwest Detroit doing community based research this summer. She plans to keep her research closely related to school and the community, as she finds this to be very important and interesting.