

## The Evolution of Zero Tolerance in American Schools

Students have a propensity to flourish academically, socially and emotionally when their school experience is grounded in a safe and supportive environment. Creating and maintaining safe school environments is challenging and complex. Focused work in this area of safe schools has seen a decrease in the national rates of school violence, but many schools continue to struggle to develop and maintain the positive school environments needed to support student achievement. No student or adult should feel unsafe in school, yet this is often the case.

The term zero tolerance is often connected to the dialogue on school safety, its use and meaning has over time evolved. Initially attached to federal drug policy in the 1980's its intent was to send a message that specific behaviors would not be tolerated no matter how minor. The term evolved and began to be applied to a broad range of societal issues, violence in schools becoming one of these issues. By the end of 1993, zero tolerance policies had been adopted across the country, encompassing drugs weapons, tobacco use and school disruption. Societal concerns over growing violence in US schools prompted the passing of the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 which embedded the concept of zero tolerance into the law. As the law was implemented in US schools, zero-tolerance policies have varied considerably from district to district, and many districts have frequently extended zero-tolerance beyond existing federal definitions. This has resulted in a wide range of consequences for students that many believe have overstepped the boundaries of the original law. The repercussions for what may be determined by some as a small infraction, such as coloring on a desk, can range from simply talking to the child and then having them clean off the desk to an arrest with 8 hours of community service (Aul, 2012). Attorney General Eric Holder (2014) believes these well intentioned "zero-tolerance" policies too often introduce the criminal justice system into the resolution of problems. This can result in psychological damage and behavioral ramifications which can be far more damaging and have a longer lasting impact on students. Instilling harsh punishments may result in a lifetime of internal scarring.

The US Justice and Education departments (2014) found that research suggests racial disparities in how students are disciplined. This joint report identified cases where African-American students were disciplined more harshly and more frequently because of their race than similarly situated white students. A letter to school districts was sent to school districts which state that "In short, racial discrimination in school discipline is a real problem." US Justice and Education departments (2014).

In an effort to address this critical concern a wide-ranging series of guidelines was developed by the US Department of Education and released to the public in January of 2014. It calls for schools across the nation to adhere to the principle of fairness and equity in student discipline. The American Civil Liberties Union called the recommendations "ground-breaking." "A routine school disciplinary infraction should land a student in the principal's office, not in a police precinct," Attorney General Eric Holder said.

This presentation will examine current zero tolerance policies as well as analyzing the new US guidelines recommended for improving school climate and discipline.