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Zero Tolerance Policies In Schools

Despite their serious flaws, zero tolerance policies are implemented across schools in the United States. Policies like these were put into action in hopes to improve safety but did not prove effective in decreasing misbehavior or violence. In fact, there are many negative examples of the zero tolerance approach being used. There are multiple superior alternatives, and it is critical districts review these. The problems that were meant to be solved using this policy were not corrected, so action must be taken to ensure that schools are safer by replacing it with a higher quality policy.

Zero tolerance policies were meant to make schools more secure but did not increase safety whatsoever, and the impact they have on students is negative. In the past, serious issues led schools to look for an effective method in controlling behavior. They decided to use the zero tolerance policy to prevent those problems. As stated in the article “Zero Tolerance Policies”, it was used in the 1980s to prevent the use of drugs. It now applies to many other offenses including violence, bullying, weapons, etc.. The American Psychological Association says zero tolerance is, “a philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context,” (“Zero Tolerance Policies”). Although it was meant to solve issues, it just caused more problems. David S.

Mitchell from Washington University of Law claims, “To date, the legal challenges to zero tolerance policies on a variety of different grounds have proven to be unsuccessful.” He also stated, “And yet, while there does not appear to be a valid constitutional claim, it does not mean that zero tolerance policies do not have a long-term and devastating impact on the individual student's current and future life outcomes.” Thus, it is pointless to continue using this policy and about time to find a better one.

Multiple students have experienced the flaws of the zero tolerance approach. One specific example of this is a middle school student receiving a suspension for something extremely minor. Jean Klasovsky, from TED, claims, the child was suspended for having a water gun during recess. Schools take situations like that too seriously; the worst that should have happened is earning detention. She also said some students were suspended for more than a week for skipping class. Sending them home for skipping class will not inspire them to show up. Many defenders of the zero tolerance policy claim it ensures everyone is equal. However, it does the exact opposite. As reported by the article “Zero Tolerance”, “One study, issued by the Advancement Project in 2000, suggested that zero tolerance, while supposedly a neutral policy, was applied disproportionately to students of color.” The zero tolerance method in schools can target certain individuals. Therefore, not only does this policy apply to strange offenses like skipping class and using water guns, it also fails to treat everyone equally.

There are many excellent and effective alternatives to zero tolerance policies. One of those alternatives is called restorative justice. Schools that use restorative justice try to solve the issues that cause the poor behavior of their students, rather than just sending them home, right back to their problems. According to Jean Klasovsky, a lecturer on TED, Chicago Public Schools

have restorative justice rooms. In these rooms, all students receive the help they need, including counseling and talking circles. She also said schools with restorative justice have better attendance and test scores. Another alternative is to simply have clearer and more specific rules. David S. Mitchell, from the Washington University of Law, states the zero tolerance policy is way too broad, and it is difficult to understand what is considered against the rules. According to Mr. Berg, the principal of Farmington Senior High School, the school does not use the zero tolerance policy, because it is unfair and does not look at each situation. However, the school does have a handbook on their website (“Handbook for Student Management”). That handbook is referenced when deciding consequences for students, and not all the consequences result in suspension. Evidently, the zero tolerance approach is not the best in schools, and there are many alternatives that will increase better behavior.

Zero tolerance causes more problems than benefits. The policy was implemented to deter negative mannerisms but failed to do so. Just because many students have had to deal with this harsh and unfair policy, does not mean students in the future should. When compared to the alternatives, such as restorative justice, the zero tolerance approach is inferior. It is about time schools replace zero tolerance policies to make schools a safer environment for all students.

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