



## Education



# Julia Steiny: Zero-tolerance policies in schools need to end

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, May 31, 2009

“Zero Tolerance is a social disease,” announces Dr. Aviva Rich-Shea.

Such a refreshing idea. From schools to prisons, America’s zeal for retribution and punishment of misbehavior only makes bad situations worse.

Rich-Shea teaches crime and justice studies at University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, and is a fellow at Suffolk University’s Center for Restorative Justice. The center collects, studies and teaches ways of disciplining misbehavior that hold offenders accountable while helping them, the victims and their community heal and repair the harm.

“With zero tolerance, what had been kids’ defiant behavior became assault. In schools, bullying, fighting and sexual harassment are now criminalized. Research shows that these harsh, punitive policies have a negative effect on school climate and reduce academic achievement. But the problem of zero tolerance is much bigger than the schools. We’re in an era of restricting civil rights generally. So severe, punitive social controls are filtering down to youth.”

Over the last two decades, desperate, angry efforts to curb misbehavior have banished troubled youth into burgeoning prisons. But banishment never gets to the root of the misbehavior.

The story of zero tolerance began in the late 1980s, when crack cocaine and a surge of easily-available guns plagued America’s streets, especially its cities. The virtuous-sounding slogan appealed to frightened communities. Campaigning politicians promised “zero tolerance” to brandish their high morals and hearty appetites for “getting tough” with bad guys.

In 1994 the feds passed the “Gun-free Schools Act,” mandating that any school receiving federal money — such as Title 1 poverty aid — must expel a child who brought a gun to school, for one year.

The law did not mandate that school staff find out if the kid really intended to be aggressive, or was scared, confused or showing off.

In 1996, the feds amended the law to encourage schools to expand the scope of zero tolerance to include any and all weapons or drugs. With self-righteous zeal, schools began punishing kids for having a kitchen knife to spread peanut butter. Carrying Midol, pain relief for menstrual cramps, became “drug possession.” A Boy Scout who forgot that his knife was in his pocket was toast.

Rich-Shea invokes the case, currently before the Supreme Court, of the Arizona 13-year-old who was strip-searched at school. Vindictive students told administrators that she had prescription-strength Ibuprofen — drug possession — which wasn’t even true. The school argues it was merely following procedure to ensure a drug-free environment.

Shortly after Rich-Shea’s talk, the court did hear that case. Several justices sympathized with the school’s administrators because they need to combat drug abuse with whatever force they see fit.

Wow. Really?

An exasperated Rich-Shea tells us that by 1998, school suspensions had reached 3.2 million per year, where they’ve since plateaued. Minorities are two to three times as likely to be suspended than white kids. Males four times as likely as females. Just for the record, a kid who’s been suspended is statistically at high risk of dropping out of school. “Disciplinary exclusions deny students education,” she says. “What are we doing? A thousand students drop out every hour of every school day.” Suspensions certainly pushed out many of them.

Rich-Shea says, “Suspensions do not change anyone’s behavior. Mainly it punishes the parents. Early suspensions predict an even higher rise in further misbehavior. The school is certainly not promoting trust among its students if they can be banished.”

Rich-Shea questions the practice of hiring police, euphemistically called School Resource Offices (SRO), to patrol schools. “Having police in schools has changed the dynamic. Supposedly, they’re there to get to know the kids. But SROs say that when they see illegal behavior, they’re sworn to make an arrest.”

In her research, Rich-Shea found no evidence that zero tolerance has made the schools any safer, nor has it improved the kids’ feeling of being safe in schools.

Quite the opposite, kids who’ve been harshly treated tend to escalate their acting out.

Then for lack of any better idea, when punishment fails, schools and communities punish yet more harshly. Kids who skip detention get suspension. After so-many minor infractions, suspension is automatic. This is like taking a double-dose of the same medicine when it didn’t work in the first place.

Rich-Shea says, “No one intended this. No one set out to create a school-to-prison pipeline. But we have gotten used to it.”

Educators are wringing their hands over the recently-released NAEP scores among 17-year-olds, because they have not improved since 1970. But if you take a good hard look at communities’ fearful and controlling attitudes towards kids — at least other people’s kids — it’s a wonder youths cooperate as much as they do. Yes, parenting has fallen on very hard times. Realistically, schools must pick up some of the slack by teaching and modeling responsible, community-appropriate behavior.

Understanding why kids act out is the first order of business. Teaching them alternatives is next.

Suffolk’s Center for Restorative Justice studies and collects restorative techniques for handling misbehavior, including ancient tribal-circle techniques. Theirs is critically important work in progress. Because what schools do now wrecks lots of kids.

Zero tolerance is totally backfiring.

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