

Discipline, Achievement, and Race

Is Zero Tolerance the Answer?

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represented the population we were trying to reach, which was primarily teachers in mainstream public middle and high schools. The other four groups were comprised of teachers at the school where we held the focus groups, with the exception of one group where two of the seven teachers came from a nearby high school (see table 5.1).

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Exclusion Is Not the Only Alternative: The Children Left Behind Project

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Current evidence strongly suggests that the philosophy and practice of zero tolerance school discipline has failed as an educational intervention to ensure student safety, improve school climates, advance student learning, or provide equitable results; yet, the approach remains popular among many educational administrators and political leaders. The popularity of zero tolerance, however, does not mean that all educational leaders ascribe to this paradigm. Absent from much of the research base to date are the voices of school principals actively promoting alternative philosophies and practices better suited to meet the paramount goals of student safety and learning. This chapter describes the findings of the Children Left Behind project, focusing on the perspectives and practices of school leaders in one midwestern state. The emerging results of this project suggest that (1) diversity exists among school principals in their endorsement of zero tolerance school discipline, (2) the disciplinary perspectives of school principals are related to the use of exclusionary student removal and use of preventive alternatives, and (3) the perspective of principals endorsing alternatives to student exclusion suggest that removing students from the learning environment is not the only method available for keeping students safe to learn.

Out-of-school suspension and expulsion are widely used in our schools, and their frequency is increasing. Our best evidence to date shows that suspension and expulsion are among the most widely used disciplinary techniques, perhaps the most frequently used disciplinary tools (Bowditch, 1993;

Mansfield and Farris, 1992; Rose, 1988; Skiba, Peterson, and Williams, 1997; Uchitelle, Bartz, and Hillman, 1989). National data estimate that about 7 percent of the school population missed at least one day of school due to being suspended or expelled, double the number since the 1970s (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Wald and Losen, 2003). Further, large and widening racial disparities are evident in the composition of students removed from school; in 2000, while representing 17 percent of the student population, African Americans represented 34 percent of the suspended population (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Wald and Losen, 2003). African American students are currently 2.6 times as likely to be suspended compared to white students, up from about two times as likely in the 1970s (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Wald and Losen, 2003).

Scholars have suggested that the surge and growing inequity in student removal is due in part to the emergence and popularity of the philosophy termed "zero tolerance" (Ayers, Dohrn, and Ayers, 2001; Noguera, 1995; Skiba and Peterson, 1999; Verdugo, 2002; Wald and Losen, 2003). In short, zero tolerance school discipline is based on the assumption of *deterrence*: irrespective of context, punishing school "troublemakers" severely sends a message that misbehavior will not be tolerated, and schools will be more orderly and safer for those remaining. The philosophy assumes that distributing uniform punishments and removing disruptive students will yield safer schools, improved climates more conducive to learning, and more equitable distribution of punishment (Skiba, 2004).

Although intuitively appealing, our best evidence has failed to support the assumptions of zero tolerance. Zero tolerance in general and suspension and expulsion in particular have been associated with a number of negative schooling outcomes including higher rates of dropout (Bowditch, 1993), a more punitive schooling environment (Bickel and Qualls, 1980), high rates of repeat offending (Tobin, Sugai, and Colvin, 1996), and increased racial inequality without any evidence of higher rates of misbehavior in minority student populations (Skiba et al., 2002; Wald and Losen, 2003). Frequent use of student exclusion has also been found to be related to lower achievement on state accountability examinations, even after controlling for other strong sociodemographic predictors of achievement (Davis and Jordan, 1994; Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, and Ferron, 2002; Rausch, Skiba, and Simmons, 2005). Further, emerging evidence suggests that zero tolerance strengthens a school-to-prison pipeline by criminalizing student misbehavior that would normally have been addressed by school officials (Advancement Project, 2005; Wald and Losen, 2003).

In spite of the evidence suggesting the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance

school discipline, it remains a popular approach advocated by many political leaders and educational administrators. Recent evidence at the national, state, and school-district levels have demonstrated large surges in the number and percent of students being suspended and expelled from school, often coinciding with the implementation of zero tolerance policies (Advancement Project, 2005; Gordon, Della Piana, and Keleher, 2001; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Michigan Public Policy Institute, 2003; Potts et al., 2003; Richart, Brooks, and Soler, 2003). The popularity is also illustrated by state legislatures and local school districts broadening the mandate of zero tolerance beyond the federal mandates of firearms (i.e., the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994; Public Law 103-227, 1994) to drugs and alcohol, fighting, and threats or swearing. Many school boards continue to toughen their disciplinary policies; some have begun to experiment with permanent expulsion from the system for some offenses. Others have begun to apply school suspensions, expulsions, or transfers to behaviors that occur outside of school (Ayers et al., 2001; Michigan Public Policy Initiative, 2003; Potts et al., 2003).

Yet the current popularity of zero tolerance school discipline does not mean that all educational leaders ascribe to this paradigm, including those serving student populations assumed to be at a higher risk for school removal (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Dunbar and Villarruel, 2004; Mukuria, 2002; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Absent from much of the research literature to date are the perspectives and practices of school leaders explicitly advocating an approach that favors preventive alternatives to student removal. Consistent with a growing research base suggesting that prevention is more effective than removal (Dwyer, Osher, and Warger, 1998; Elliott et al., 2001; Gagnon and Leone, 2001; Mihalic et al., 2001; Thornton et al., 2000), these voices-in-practice offer much to the dialogue on how best to ensure safe and productive learning environments for students.

There is no debate that schools must be places that preserve, maintain, and create climates conducive to learning for *all* students, and disciplinary systems must facilitate progress toward these goals. The question that creates controversy is *how* to create disciplinary systems supportive of these ends. The large and growing research base suggests that student exclusion as a primary part of a school's disciplinary system has been unable to help educators meet these goals. Thus, alternative perspectives and practices from those engaged with students every day are of paramount importance. This chapter seeks to fill this gap, by describing some of the findings of the Children Left Behind project,¹ illustrating that many school leaders believe that preventive disciplinary systems are best suited to achieve the goal of creating school climates conducive to learning.

THE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND PROJECT

The goals of the Children Left Behind project were twofold: (1) to open a statewide dialogue concerning the best methods for promoting and maintaining a safe and productive learning climate in the schools of this midwestern state, and (2) to initiate and maintain a forum for discussion between those in the juvenile justice system and the state's educational system to ensure that methods chosen for maintaining order in our schools do not jeopardize the human potential of young people or the overall safety of communities. The project was guided by two foundational principles: (1) schools have a right and responsibility to apply methods that are effective in maintaining a climate that is as free as possible of disruptions to student learning, and (2) best practice suggests, and recent federal policy mandates (i.e., the No Child Left Behind Act; Public Law 107-110, 2002), that all educational practices employed in schools must maximize the opportunity to learn for all children, regardless of their background.

In the following sections, we describe the data from the Children Left Behind project, highlighting the perspectives-in-practice of local principals in creating and maintaining safe and productive schools. First, we describe results from a survey of school principals, querying their attitudes about the purpose, process, and outcomes of school discipline. Next, the results of in-depth interviews with principals describing preventive practices used in their schools are presented. One of these interviews, describing how a preventive approach can have a transformative effect on the schooling environment, is described in more detail.

PRINCIPAL PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: THE DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES SURVEY

A common misconception held by some educators and policy makers is that there are virtually no alternatives to school removal for maintaining safe schools. However, surveys with principals in this midwestern state suggest that a diversity of perspectives, opinions, and activities exist within schools.

A survey of 325 school principals was conducted in the state of Indiana to better understand principal attitudes towards school discipline (Skiba and Edl, 2004). The survey was administered in an online format during March and April of 2003. Principals were asked to rate their agreement with statements reflecting various attitudes about school discipline. Principals were also asked to rate usage of a number of preventive disciplinary strategies (e.g., bullying prevention, conflict resolution, etc.) in their schools.

Results revealed that principals hold very different perspectives on school

discipline. Principals were almost evenly split over whether zero tolerance "sends a clear message to disruptive students about appropriate behavior in schools." Further, a large majority (98.5 percent) of principals thought that "teachers ought to be able to manage the majority of students' misbehavior in their classrooms." Yet, only 29 percent thought that teachers were adequately trained by their teacher training programs to deal with student misbehavior.

Further statistical analysis revealed three distinct perspectives on school discipline among these principals (see table 6.1). These clusters were categorized as prevention orientation, support for suspension and expulsion, and pragmatic prevention. Importantly, differences in principal perspectives were not only associated with use of suspension but were also related to attitudes regarding parents, students, and special education disciplinary regulations.

Table 6.1 Representative items endorsed more frequently by principals with different perspectives on school discipline*

- Group 1: Prevention Orientation
- Developing and implementing prevention programs pays off in terms of decreased disruption and disciplinary incidents.
 - Suspension and expulsion do not really solve disciplinary problems.
 - Students with disabilities who engage in disruptive behavior need a different approach to discipline than students in general education.
 - I feel it is critical to work with parents before suspending a student from school.
 - Conversations with students referred to the office should be factored into most decisions about disciplinary consequences.
- Group 2: Support for Suspension and Expulsion
- Zero tolerance makes a significant contribution to maintaining order at my school.
 - Out-of-school suspension is a necessary tool for maintaining school order.
 - Most if not all disciplinary problems come from inadequacies in the child's home situation.
 - Disciplinary regulations for special education create a separate system that makes it more difficult to enforce discipline.
 - My duties as an administrator simply don't allow me the time to get to know students on an individual basis.
- Group 3: Pragmatic Prevention
- Suspension and expulsion allow students time away from school that encourages them to think about their behavior.
 - Teachers at this school were adequately prepared to handle problems of misbehavior and discipline.
 - *Least likely to believe that:* Regardless of whether it is effective, suspension is virtually our only option.
 - *Least likely to believe that:* Violence is getting worse at my school.

*Unless otherwise noted, items listed are those that the group in question on average rated the highest of the three groups, and significantly higher than at least one other group.

For example, the one third of responding principals supporting a preventive approach to discipline were also more likely to believe that it is critical to work with parents before suspension, that discipline should be adapted to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and that conversations with students are an important part of the disciplinary process. This cluster of principals served schools with fewer suspensions for both serious infractions (e.g., drugs, weapons) and general disruptive behavior, and were more likely to report having conflict resolution, individual behavior plans, peer mediation, bullying prevention, and anger management programs in place.

In contrast, one third of the principals supported the use of suspension and expulsion and agreed that zero tolerance makes a significant contribution to maintaining order at their school. They were also more likely to believe that discipline problems stem from an inadequate home situation, that special education disciplinary regulations create a separate system that makes it more difficult to enforce discipline, and that they lack sufficient time to get to know students on an individual basis. These principals served schools with higher rates of out-of-school suspension.

The final group of principals that emerged might be termed a “pragmatic prevention” group. On the one hand, these principals agreed that out-of-school suspension and expulsion encourage students to think about their behavior, but they are also least likely to believe that suspension and expulsion were their only options and were least likely to believe that school violence was increasing at their school. The attitudes expressed by this group tended to fall somewhere in-between the first two groups. They also more closely resembled the prevention orientation group, with a lower rate of suspension and a higher reported use of prevention programs than principals who supported suspension and expulsion.

Thus, consistent with previous research (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Morrison, Morrison, and Minjarez, 1999; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002), there appear to be important differences among principals in their beliefs about school discipline. In the following sections, we explore these perspectives in more detail, presenting interviews with principals who have chosen a more preventive approach to discipline for maintaining a safe and productive school climate.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND ACTIONS TO ZERO TOLERANCE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

In order to come to a deeper understanding of the choices that principals make at the school level, the Children Left Behind project interviewed princi-

pals across the state who described a variety of options they use as an alternative to zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions.² Principals participating in the study were solicited through the state association of school principals and volunteered to share information about programs in their schools that they feel are effective in maintaining a safe and productive learning climate. Protocols were developed and used querying the following areas: (1) philosophy/program description (e.g., what is the school’s disciplinary philosophy, who does the program serve, where is it located, etc.), (2) structure (e.g., what methods are used to prevent violence and disruption from occurring or intervene when they do occur), and (3) outcomes (e.g., how have students and staff responded to this philosophy/program).

Telephone interviews were conducted with nine principals and one high school assistant principal responsible for discipline. Interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Transcribed interview data were analyzed for trends and themes (Silverman, 2000; Yin, 2003) specific to programs, practices, and perspectives that participants reported using to maintain safe and productive schools. Three researchers analyzed the data independently and then came to a consensus on the most relevant, recurring, and informative themes and trends.

Across conversations with principals serving a diversity of schools, three primary themes emerged: (1) the necessity of intervening proactively rather than reactively, (2) an emphasis on building and strengthening connections with students, especially those placed at risk, and (3) utilizing creative options to suspension and expulsion, even for the most extreme behavior. Each of these themes is described in turn below.

Proactive Intervention

Principals stressed the importance of promoting a common understanding among staff, students, parents, and administrators of how discipline works at their schools. These principals work closely with their teachers to define what the most appropriate referrals to the office are and which are better handled at the classroom level.

“We went through some scenarios—for example, a child taking a pencil away from another child—that should never come to the office. A child who intentionally is trying to hurt another child—that directly comes to the office. . . . My philosophy has always been you settle it at the lowest level.”

Principals suggested that this approach actually gives teachers more authority in their classrooms.

Once you send a child to the office, as a classroom teacher you give up a part of your control over that child. . . . So, I think as a school we've come to realize that it's a lot better to handle the discipline within the team [of teachers] if we can because that sends a message to the student that the team has control.

Such an approach also frees up administrator time, noted the principals, from having to deal with an endless stream of referrals to more time for counseling students or meeting for planning with teacher teams.

These schools also reported involving parents throughout the disciplinary process. At a number of schools, teachers contact parents before any referral to the office is made. In one school, parents are actively encouraged to support the school's disciplinary code early in the year:

"At the beginning of the year, I had the child sign [the code of conduct card], and I had the parents sign it. . . . At our back-to-school meeting, I shared with the parents that I was asking for their support."

As a result of such communication, parents tend to be more supportive of school disciplinary actions, as this urban elementary school principal notes,

"I have very few parents who get upset with me because a lot of times we've done a lot of interventions. . . . There are no surprises. And, I have to think the parents appreciate that because they've been part of it through the entire process."

Building Meaningful Relationships with Students, Especially Those Placed At Risk

School alienation has been found to be a risk factor for both juvenile delinquency (Elliot, Hamburg, and Williams, 1998) and deadly school violence (Vossekuil et al., 2002). For those students whose behavior indicates a higher risk for disruption, principals suggested that they worked hard to establish communication with students. One high school administrator noted,

We're very hands-on administrators. I think that the students feel like they can come to us at any time and work with us. We go to a lot of student activities, a lot more than I know most administrators do, just trying to be present and let the students know that we really do care, and we try to work with them. That's not a program; that's just kind of a philosophy that we have.

As a result, these administrators believe that students are more willing to communicate potential problems to staff and administrators in the building. An assistant principal in a suburban high school described the school's attempts to keep channels of communication open:

"Every time he [the principal] has the student body together, he reminds them that if there is anything out there that's lingering and dangerous to make sure that you bring it forward. He just continually impresses upon the kids how important communication is."

Trust of administrators proved critical in this building: when a student approached the administration to report a student with a cache of weapons, administrators and local police were able to take preventive action that headed off a potentially deadly situation (*Herald Times*, 2001).

Mentoring programs, such as the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program have been identified as among the most effective programs for reducing the risk of violence (Mihalic et al., 2001). At one urban elementary school, every adult, from administrators to teachers to custodial staff, was asked to mentor one child who had been identified as someone "who we considered to be disconnected from school."

And all we asked was that the adults would meet with these kids once a week . . . I would have lunch with this child, and we would play chess and we would talk . . . We saw that we were making progress with these kids because really a lot of these kids didn't have anyone who really took an interest in them.

Many of the principals remarked on the relationship for many students between risk for academic failure and risk for acting-out behavior. One administrator in a suburban high school described the relationship between academic and behavioral problems this way:

Some behavioral problems are due to [a student's] feeling inadequate in the classroom or feeling as if they can't perform academically—"I'd rather be bad than dumb." That [understanding] has really helped us a lot. . . . We have alleviated that problem by trying to keep kids from feeling that way in whatever setting they are in.

Creative Alternatives to Student Removal

By no means were the principals we talked with inclined to in any way relax their expectations for appropriate behavior. Suspension and expulsion were by no means ruled out as an option for seriously disruptive behavior.

We will not put up with misbehavior. . . . You are here to learn, and we're going to do everything we can to provide the proper education. Your teachers are here to work with you. We're doing everything we can to support you, but then again we will not deal with any misbehaviors. That's the bottom line. If you hit somebody, you're going to be suspended.