

# HANDBOOK OF CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

*Research, Practice,  
and Contemporary Issues*

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2006

LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS  
Mahwah, New Jersey

London

# Zero Tolerance, Suspension, and Expulsion: Questions of Equity and Effectiveness

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## INTRODUCTION

There can be no question that schools need sound disciplinary systems to maintain school safety and promote student learning. Indeed, in the face of multiple-victim homicides in the late 1990s, schools have been increasingly motivated to address issues of disruption and violence. Pressure from teachers who are concerned about the safety of their classrooms (Public Agenda, 2004) and from parents who wish to ensure school safety (Pew Research Center, 2000) have motivated schools and communities to search for methods that can promote safe school climates maximally conducive to learning.

Yet the climate of fear that has prevailed in recent years has also generated support for more punitive methods of school discipline, often under the broad rhetoric of *zero tolerance* (Noguera, 1995). Zero tolerance emerged from national drug policy of the 1990s and mandates severe punishments, typically out-of-school suspension and expulsion, for both serious and relatively minor infractions (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). The rise of zero tolerance philosophy has led to substantial increases in rates of out-of-school suspension and expulsion (Michigan Public Policy Initiative, 2003; Potts, Njie, Detch, & Walton, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Thus, schools face what is an apparently profound dilemma. To fulfill their responsibility to promote safe climates conducive to learning many schools and school districts increased their use of procedures that remove some children from the opportunity to learn. Under federal education legislation, No Child Left Behind, schools are under a mandate to use "only practices that are evidence-based, so only the best ideas with proven results are introduced into the classroom" (No Child Left Behind Act Fact Sheet, 2001). The purpose of this chapter is to examine what we know about the use of school exclusion as a disciplinary strategy. Are zero tolerance, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion effective methods for promoting safe and effective school climates? Are there effective alternatives that can keep schools safe without removing students from the opportunity to learn?

## CONTEXT, HISTORY, AND CURRENT STATUS

## Purposes of School Discipline

Although school discipline has increasingly come to be associated in the public mind with the use of punishment and school exclusion (Skiba & Peterson, 1999), there are in fact a number of important instructional and organizational purposes to any school disciplinary system:

- **Ensuring the safety of students and teachers.** Incidents of deadly school violence in the 1990s have drawn acute attention to the need to guarantee the safety of students and teachers. The most recent national data on school safety suggest that there has been a 50% drop in violent crimes committed at schools since 1992 (DeVoe et al., 2004), yet one in three teachers still report that physical violence is a very or somewhat serious problem at their schools (Public Agenda, 2004). Clearly, a primary purpose of school disciplinary systems must be to prevent incidents that could threaten the safety of students or staff.
- **Creating a climate conducive to learning.** Even beyond issues of physical safety, students cannot learn and teachers cannot teach in a school environment characterized by disruption, chaos, or frequent behavioral interruptions. Research in educational psychology has shown that student learning is largely a direct result of the amount and quality of instruction that students receive (Brophy, 1988; Fisher et al., 1981; Hattie, 2002; Reynolds & Walberg, 1991; Wang & Haertel, 1994; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997). Effective disciplinary systems should improve academic outcomes by increasing the amount and quality of time teachers can spend teaching, rather than responding to behavioral disruptions.
- **Teaching students needed skills for successful interaction in school and society.** It is interesting to note that the word *discipline* comes from the same Latin root as the word *disciple*: *discipere*, to teach or comprehend. *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1998) defines discipline as "The treatment suited to a disciple or learner; education; development of the faculties by instruction, and exercise; training, whether physical, mental, or moral." Recent survey research indicates that a large majority of both teachers (93%) and parents (88%) believe one fundamental element of a school's mission is to "teach kids rules so they are ready to join society" (Public Agenda, 2004, p.8). Children will always require socialization, instruction, and correction that shapes fundamentally egocentric behavior into interpersonal skills that make them capable of interacting successfully with others in school and beyond.
- **Reducing rates of future misbehavior.** Behavioral psychology defines the term *punishment* as something that reduces the probability of occurrence of some behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2003; Driscoll, 2000; Maag, 2001; Skinner, 1953). One might then expect that those disciplinary interventions that are effective will lead to reduced rates of inappropriate or disruptive behavior in the school setting.

It is important to note that zero tolerance is not simply a strategy, but also a philosophy of school discipline (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). As such, there are a number of purposes for school discipline that are associated specifically with the philosophy of zero tolerance:

- **A belief in the deterrent function of school punishment.** An implied purpose of severe punishment is the deterrent effect on others who may witness that punishment (Noguera, 1995). Ewing (2000) argued that zero tolerance "appropriately denounces violent student behavior in no uncertain terms and serves as a deterrent to such behavior in the future by sending a clear message that acts which physically harm or endanger others will not be permitted at school under any circumstances."

- **Remove troubled** the idea of suspending disruptive student  
A large majority of if persistently troubled would be much more  
• **What happens if** belief in the deterrent punish misbehavior about safety (Lars

Before examining whether been effective in meeting and definition of zero t

## Zero Tolerance: Back

Zero tolerance first received U.S. Attorney Peter Ni of drugs. U.S. Attorney in 1988, and ordered closed the border with even the Beginning in 1989, school term *zero tolerance* and 1993, zero tolerance policies not only drugs and weapons tolerance into national Act of 1994 into law. The referral of these student law must authorize the expulsions on a case-by-

State legislatures are beyond the federal mandate. Many school boards experiment with permanent Others have begun to apply outside of school.

Since the passage of to have become prevalent dates predetermined common Education Statistics Rowand, Williams, & policies for weapons or fire important to note, how would expect that there terminated consequences reported for zero tolerance typical and more limited primarily as a method punishing all offenses s