Research Brief
Zero Tolerance Policies

Question:
>Are these policies fair or unfair to students in general and minorities in particular? Is there a model that is working well that is a deterrent to violence and drugs in the school?

Summary of Findings: Much of this brief comes from the ERIC Digest on Zero Tolerance Policies (ERIC #: ED451579). State legislatures and school boards are adopting a growing number of zero-tolerance polices toward weapons, guns, and violence. Zero-tolerance polices are rules intended to address specific school-safety issues. Despite the controversies that it has created in school districts throughout the country, zero tolerance continues to be a widely used response to school disruption and violence.

Results have been mixed. After four years of implementation, the National Center for Education Statistics found that schools employing zero-tolerance policies are still less safe than those without such policies. Intended to improve school safety by ensuring student compliance with rules, zero tolerance has become an excuse to treat all children needing corrective measures the same. Zero-tolerance discipline attempts to send a message by punishing both major and minor incidents severely. Zero tolerance policies do not provide guidance or instruction and often breed student distrust toward adults, nurturing an adversarial attitude. Suspended students suffer academically. Critics of zero tolerance argue that such polices worsen problems in the long term by excluding at-risk students and increasing dropout rates. They also charge that the policies are inconsistently applied and interpreted.

Findings from a national study of school discipline and zero tolerance policies in school districts nationwide indicate that in every district studied, there are significant racial disparities in student suspensions and expulsions. According to findings from the U.S. Department of Education, zero tolerance policies are more likely to exist in predominantly African-American and Latino school districts. By increasing school expulsions, zero tolerance policies have a disproportionate adverse impact on students of color.

Some Districts have shown moderate success. Effective zero-tolerance policies must specify consequences; allow flexibility; consider alternatives to expulsion; clearly define weapons, drugs, and inappropriate acts; involve the collaboration of all stakeholders; build on lessons from early programs; integrate health-education programs; tailor policies to local needs; and implement regular program reviews. Sound policies must allow for discretion, incorporate a range of sanctions that appropriately reflect incident severity,

direct expelled students to counseling, and be developed as part of broader policies for school safety.

Viable alternatives to Zero Tolerance Policies include building a respectful, caring learning environment by enhancing students' sense of belonging and providing bonding opportunities for teachers and students; implementing a comprehensive character-education program; teaching conflict-resolution strategies; screening and early identification; teacher training in classroom management; clear codes of conduct; positive approaches to discipline including those focused on problem prevention

Online Resources:

Zero Tolerance Policies. ERIC Digest Number 146.

McAndrews, Tobin

Zero-tolerance polices have arisen in part as a response to the threat of the withdrawal of federal funds under the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act, and pressure to address school violence created by extensive media coverage of incidents during the 1990s. The National Center for Education Statistics found that after 4 years, zero-tolerance polices had little effect on previously unsafe schools. Positive results are reported by some schools. Critics of zero tolerance argue that such polices worsen problems in the long term by excluding at-risk students and increasing dropout rates. They also charge that the policies are inconsistently applied and interpreted. Effective zero-tolerance policies must specify consequences; allow flexibility; consider alternatives to expulsion; clearly define weapons, drugs, and inappropriate acts; involve the collaboration of all stakeholders; build on lessons from early programs; integrate health-education programs; tailor policies to local needs; and implement regular program reviews. Sound policies must allow for discretion, incorporate a range of sanctions that appropriately reflect incident severity, direct expelled students to counseling, and be developed as part of broader policies for school safety.

ERIC #: ED451579

http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=Zero+Tolerance+Policies&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_metadata&_pageLabel=ERICSearchResult&newSearch=true&rnd=1117043775440&searchtype=keyword

Racial Disparities Related to School Zero Tolerance Policies: Testimony to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Keleher, Terry

This report presents findings from a national study of school discipline and zero tolerance policies in school districts nationwide. Findings indicate that in every

district studied, there are significant racial disparities in student suspensions and expulsions. By increasing school expulsions, zero tolerance policies have a disproportionate adverse impact on students of color. Zero tolerance policies are often implemented in unfair ways. They can curtail the expression of reasonable professional judgment by school educators and administrators and limit students' and parents' right to due process. There is a significant reporting deficiency in disciplinary actions in U.S. public schools.
ERIC #: ED454324

http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=Racial+Disparities+Related+to+School+Zero+Tolerance+Policies%3A&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_metadata&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&objectId=0900000b801405dc

Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline Policies. Report from a National Summit on Zero Tolerance [Proceedings]
(Washington, DC, June 15-16, 2000).
This report contends that public school administrators no longer rely on literal interpretations of states' and districts' zero tolerance policies and overzealously promote safety, inventing creative interpretations of the laws and using them to suspend and expel children based on relatively minor offenses. Minority students are disproportionately disciplined, with African Americans suspended and expelled at much higher rates than whites within the same schools. Research on schools that succeed in facilitating achievement, safety, and low disciplinary referrals indicates that they all include: positive approaches to discipline; bonding opportunities for teachers and students; teacher training in classroom management; clear codes of conduct; and discipline focused on problem prevention.
ERIC #: ED454314
http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED454314&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_metadata&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&objectId=0900000b8014057d

The Pros and Cons of Zero Tolerance
Harvard Education Letter January/February 2000
Charles Patrick Ewing of SUNY-Buffalo and Joan First of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students take different sides on harsh measures.
http://www.edletter.org/past/issues/2000-jf/zero.shtml

Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence: An Analysis of School Disciplinary Practice. Policy Research Report.
Skiba, Russell J.

Despite the controversies that it has created in school districts throughout the country, zero tolerance continues to be a widely used response to school disruption and violence. This paper explores the history, philosophy, and effectiveness of zero-tolerance school disciplinary strategies. Analysis of a representative range of zero-tolerance suspensions and expulsions suggests that controversial applications of the policy are not idiosyncratic, but may be inherent in zero-tolerance philosophy. There is as yet little evidence that the strategies typically associated with zero tolerance contribute to improved student behavior or overall school safety. Research on the effectiveness of school-security measures is extremely sparse, while data on suspension and expulsion raise serious concerns about both the equity and effectiveness of school exclusion as an educational intervention.
ERIC #: ED469537

http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED469537&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_metadata&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&objectId=0900000b80178a4b

Zero Tolerance Policy in Schools: Rationale, Consequences, and Alternatives.
Casella, Ronnie
Teachers College Record v105 n5 p872-92 Jun 2003
Discusses theory/policies supporting zero tolerance policy in schools, including rational choice theory in criminology and national crime policies based on deterrence. Potential consequences of zero tolerance policy implementation are described and shown to involve outcomes similar to those identified by researchers studying national crime policy. Using qualitative data, anecdotal evidence, and related research, the article concludes with suggestions for violence prevention based on a model of restorative justice.
ERIC #: EJ677633

http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=Zero+Tolerance+Policy+in+Schools%3A+Rationale%2C+Consequences%2C+and+Alternatives.&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_metadata&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&objectId=0900000b800017b8

Does Zero Tolerance Work?
Blair, Frank E.
Principal v79 n1 p36-37 Sep 1999
In the five years since most states passed zero-tolerance legislation, results have been moderately successful. Such policies can work under four conditions: clear consequences for misbehavior, collaborative development by all stakeholding agencies, knowledge of other states' experience, and integration of sequential and comprehensive health-education programs.
ERIC #: EJ592961

http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=Does+Zero+Tolerance+Work%3F&ERICExtSearch_SearchTy

pe_0=eric_metadata&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&objectId=0900000b8001bad3

The Dilemma of Zero Tolerance.
Holloway, John H.
Educational Leadership v59 n4 p84-85 Dec 2001-Jan 2002
Reviews research on the impact of zero-tolerance policies on student behavior and achievement. Concludes that policies are generally ineffective and often counterproductive.
ERIC #: EJ639008
http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&eric_viewStyle=list&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=Zero+Tolerance&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_metadata&eric_pageSize=10&eric_displayNtriever=false&eric_displayStartCount=11&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&objectId=0900000b8007aee7

The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools?
Skiba, Russ Peterson, Reece
Phi Delta Kappan v80 n5 p372-76,381-82 Jan 1999

After four years of implementation, the National Center for Education Statistics found that schools employing zero-tolerance policies are still less safe than those without such policies. Indiscriminate use of force is the hallmark of authoritarianism. Programmatic prevention, screening and early identification, and effective discipline policies are viable alternatives.
ERIC #: EJ579414

http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=The+Dark+Side+of+Zero+Tolerance%3A&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_metadata&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&objectId=0900000b8001393d

Proactive Thoughts on Creating Safe Schools.
Perry, Constance M.
School Community Journal v9 n1 p9-16 Spr-Sum 1999
Reactive measures such as metal detectors, I.D. badges, and zero-tolerance policies can reduce violence, but cultivating order is more effective than imposing it. Building a respectful, caring learning environment by enhancing students' sense of belonging, implementing a comprehensive character-education program, and teaching conflict-resolution strategies will improve school safety.
ERIC #: EJ589411

http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/Home.portal?_nfpb=true&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=Proactive+Thoughts+on+Creating+Safe+Schools.&ERICExtS

earch_SearchType_0=eric_metadata&_pageLabel=RecordDetails&objectId=0900000b8001acee

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http://www.educationpartnerships.org/