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Metro Columnist



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## Zero Tolerance -- For Mistakes or Second Chances

By *Marc Fisher*

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I don't know if Rebecca Perry, the superintendent of schools in Alexandria, is a habitual lush or a one-time drunk. I believe her when she says she's deeply sorry about her arrest last week on a drunken driving charge, even if her story about having had "a drink" sounds implausible (she scored a 0.12 on the blood alcohol test, which, according to the standard charts used by hospitals and police departments, equates to at least three drinks in a woman of Perry's physique).

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I agree with members of the Alexandria School Board who admire Perry for her forthright admission of wrongdoing. Forgiveness is indeed a beautiful lesson to teach.

But: I also know that if a student at the schools Perry oversees were caught disobeying the system's rules about drinking alcohol, there would be no statements from the School Board chairman about a "healing process." No tearful confession would slow or halt the machinery of punishment.

No, there would be harsh and quick action, backed up with stern

reminders about the rules, about zero tolerance, about suspensions and expulsions.

Alexandria's Student Guidelines Handbook warns that use of alcohol is a "major offense" and will result in the school system notifying the police and suspending or expelling the student. The word "forgiveness" does not appear in the 38-page document.

And it was Perry's predecessor, Herb Berg, who won an invitation to the White House to tout

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the success of T.C. Williams High School's zero-tolerance policy toward use of drugs and alcohol. Berg in 1999 proudly announced that Alexandria schools had "a zero tolerance for any kind of behavior that might lead to an escalation. If we think of our principals as traffic cops who can issue a ticket or a warning, they are delivering on their promise to parents to write tickets and not let students off with just a warning." Maybe principals should carry nightsticks, too.

Obviously, there is a difference between high school students drinking and an adult drinking. One act is illegal; the other is not. But drunken driving isn't okay for anyone, and teachers and superintendents have a particular responsibility to act as they'd want their students to act.

Schools across the country in recent years have blurred the line between teaching and meting out justice. Virginia legislators have repeatedly spurned efforts to ease the zero-tolerance mania. The lawmakers have rejected bills that would have allowed that a teenager caught carrying a plastic cafeteria utensil in a backpack or a Midol in a pocketbook might not be a criminal worthy of expulsion but just a kid doing something perfectly rational, even if it violated the letter of the code of conduct.

Discretion and proportion are lost concepts in the realm of public school behavior codes. Schools must set clear expectations and enforce rules, but they must also be places where it is safe for kids to be kids, where mistakes are expected, explained and examined. The goal is education, not expulsion.

Zero tolerance undermines trust and teaches entirely the wrong lessons: That intent doesn't matter, that people in authority must not be allowed to exercise judgment.

What should Alexandria's School Board do with Superintendent Perry? In the real world, people of good judgment should be able to consider a miscreant's past and her performance and decide what's best for her and for the institution. (Actually, in the real world, we are bizarrely torn between redemption, which we routinely offer to celebrities, sports figures and even politicians, and retribution, which we increasingly exact from plagiarists, editors and corporate executives.)

Ideally, School Board members would look at Perry -- in a public meeting, not in the secret sessions it has held so far -- and decide whether her talents more than make up for this mistake, in which case they would keep her. Then, having thought this through, they would start rolling back the trend toward unthinking, undiscerning approaches to student discipline.

But in a system that does not trust itself to make judgments about individuals, in schools that cede their moral authority to lawyers and codes and simplistic bromides such as zero tolerance, the verdict on Perry must be the same as it would be for the children whose suspensions she manages when she's sober:

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