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Birth-Control Pill Lands Fairfax Girl 2-Week Suspension

By [Michael Alison Chandler](#)
 Washington Post Staff Writer
 Sunday, April 5, 2009; Page C01

When a Fairfax County mother got an urgent call from school last month reporting that her teenage daughter was caught popping a pill at lunchtime, she did not panic. "It was probably her birth-control pill," she thought. She was right.

Her heart dropped that afternoon in the assistant principal's office at Oakton High School when she and her daughter heard the mandatory punishment: A two-week suspension and recommendation for expulsion.

"I realize my daughter broke a rule," the mother said. But in an appeal to the school system, she reasoned, "the punishment does not fit the crime."

For two decades, many schools have set zero-tolerance policies on drugs. That means no over-the-counter drugs, no prescription drugs, no pretend drugs in student lockers or pockets. When many teens have ready access to medicine cabinets filled with prescription medications such as Xanax and Vicodin, any capsule or tablet is suspect.

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Still, some parents and civil rights advocates say enforcement has been overzealous. Stringent rules have ensnared not only drug dealers and abusers, but a host of sniffling and headachy students seeking quick medical relief. The Supreme Court will consider this month the case of a 13-year-old Arizona student who was strip-searched in 2003 by an administrator who suspected that she was carrying ibuprofen pills.

Fairfax School Board members have debated over time whether to allow students to carry Tylenol or other

over-the-counter medicines without registering them with the school nurse. County policy permits cough drops to be carried on campus, for instance, but not shared. Arlington County policies permit high school students to carry over-the-counter pain relievers. A 2006 state law in Maryland overturned some local rules requiring a doctor's

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In Virginia, school systems must comply with state code regarding prescription medications and illegal drugs on campus. Students face expulsion if they bring to school any "controlled substance" or addictive drug regulated by the federal government. "Imitation controlled substances," which could include virtually any prescription pill, are subject to the same hefty repercussions. Local school boards can give a lighter punishment after a review.

In Maryland, school systems have more leeway to set their own drug policies. In the District, prescription medications should be confiscated if they are brought to school without a doctor's order, Dena Iverson, a spokeswoman for the school system, wrote in an e-mail.

Health advocates say that harsh penalties for students who take birth-control pills at school conflicts with a campaign schools are waging against teen pregnancy.

A small portion of school health clinics across the country distribute birth-control pills to teens. But in Fairfax, even carrying the pills in a backpack is counted among the most serious offenses in the Student Responsibilities and Rights handbook.

During two weeks of watching television game shows and trying to keep up with homework online, the Fairfax teen, an honor student and lettered athlete, had time to study the handbook closely. If she had been caught high on LSD, heroin or another illegal drug, she found, she would have been suspended for five days. Taking her prescribed birth-control pill on campus drew the same punishment as bringing a gun to school would have.

The teenager and her mother declined to have their names published. But they showed The Washington Post some of her discipline records, including a letter that asked the school board to reinstate the student and reexamine the regulations so students would not "needlessly suffer" in the future.

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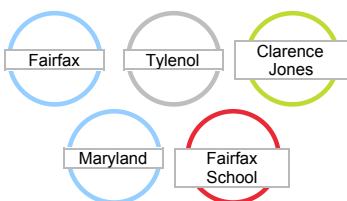
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