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FROM ABC TO PHD

Posted at 1:01 PM ET, 02/20/2011

"It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education." -- Einstein Learn everything you need to stay sane during the school years with veteran education writer Valerie Strauss and her guests.

Why school zero tolerance policies make no sense

By Valerie Strauss

The discipline policy in Fairfax County public schools failed Nick Stuban.

Stuban was a 15-year-old football player at W.T. Woodson High School who committed suicide during a [disciplinary process](#) that he was forced to undergo after he purchased a capsule of a legal substance.

According to [a story](#) by my colleague Donna St. George, he was kept out of school for seven weeks and not allowed on the school grounds to attend weekly Boy Scout meetings, sports events, or driver's education sessions. He killed himself Jan. 20.

This is not say the disciplinary system drove him to kill himself, or another boy before him in 2009. Suicide is complicated, and the reasons someone decides to take his/her own life are complex and often unknowable.

It is to say, though, that it failed to accomplish what a good disciplinary system should be aimed at: helping a student learn and move on from a mistake. The cost is too high for another such failure.

The problem is not, St. George reported, singular in the Stuban case; she found patterns in at least a dozen other Fairfax disciplinary cases in which first-time offenders were out of school for months and often forced to change schools. She quoted a lawyer who has handled scores of disciplinary cases in which parents reported feeling like they were undergoing a criminal proceeding.

Fairfax Superintendent Jack Dale has [defended the policy](#), saying it isn't "zero tolerance." Some county officials say it is.

Whatever you want to call it, it needs to be revisited.

Stuban was disciplined for buying a capsule of a substance known as [JWH-018](#), a synthetic compound with a marijuana-like effect. JWH-018 was legal, but his hearing officer told St. George that the same standard is applied to all cases of possessing drugs, controlled substances or imitation substances. That includes even oregano if it is packaged to look like marijuana.

Does that make sense, especially when Stuban said that he bought the substance thinking it was legal?

It is well past time for school districts to drop no-tolerance policies in which the consequence is often far worse than the offense. There is no solid research showing any positive effect on individual behavior or overall school safety. They are also cruel and counterproductive.


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