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What 'zero tolerance' meant for my son

By *Sonia Mey-Schmidt, Herndon*
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In a [letter last month to The Post](#) on the Fairfax schools' "zero-tolerance" discipline policy, Centreville High School teacher David Campbell referred to a student who "complained that his disciplinary hearing was 'degrading' and that he was 'treat[ed] like a criminal.'" Mr. Campbell was talking about my son, Dante Verme. Perhaps readers would be interested in the full story, which suggests that the strengths and weakness of Fairfax's system are less black-and-white than some might think.

Dante's main offense (or "crime," as Mr. Campbell called it) was graffiti. He spray-painted a smiley face and signed his nickname on a high school wall. He also trespassed at two other schools but left no additional graffiti.

My son made a big mistake. He regrets it and has apologized. He has paid for it in many different ways, and he will continue paying until he is 22, when his ability to visit any Fairfax County school will no longer be strictly limited to his assigned program - if he behaves. Neither he nor we asked or expected the hearing officers "to boost his self-esteem," as Mr. Campbell put it. For that, fortunately, he has family, teachers and friends who recognize that he is basically a very good kid.

Because of his mistake, in January 2010, Dante was suspended and recommended for expulsion by the principal of Chantilly High, his former school. The recommendation was upheld by the Fairfax school system's central hearing office at Dante's first discipline hearing. But with the help of a lawyer and the support of family and friends, as well as Chantilly's assistant principal, his counselor, his special education and regular teachers and his football coaches, we appealed the hearing office's decision to the Fairfax County School Board.

Fortunately for Dante, the board did not concur with the recommendation of expulsion. Instead, he was placed on long-term suspension with no chance to ever return to Chantilly, or any other regular school, until the academic year was over. At that point, he applied to be reinstated into the system, and in August he was transferred by a caring and warm hearing officer - to W.T. Woodson High School, where he was warmly welcomed by his new principal, administrators, special education team, teachers, football coaches and team members.

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