

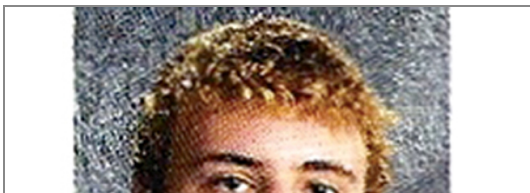
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Tragedy brings zero tolerance policy to light



Nick Stuban was suspended from Woodson for purchasing a legal substance that has similar properties to marijuana.

Photo Credit: Source: Woodson Yearbook



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Written by K.L Hoang, Staff Writer

When students go to school, their parents hope that the environment they go to every day is safe and that rules that are made to protect them are followed. But what happens when these rules, and the consequences that come from breaking them, do not protect students, but make their lives more stressful and even contribute to suicides?

Due to the recent death of former Woodson student [Nick Stuban](#), there has been an increased amount of scrutiny on the disciplinary policies in Fairfax Country Public Schools. Many believe the current zero tolerance policy toward drug and weapon possession is ineffective and unfair. Every situation can be different and not all students should be punished the same way. Students that face charges against them concerning drugs are expelled or sent to another school. Instead of helping students, disciplinary policies today hinder them and cause more damage in the various areas of their lives.

One organization that is at the forefront of changing the policies in the local area has been the Fairfax Zero Tolerance Reform ([FZTR](#)) led by Caroline Hemenway, who has been involved with education advocacy in the area for more than 15 years and is the parent of three children in FCPS.

The group contributed to the unanimous vote of the Fairfax County School Board to review topics related to student discipline procedures at a work session two weeks ago, on February 24th. “We believe that in order to ensure a thorough review, the Board needs sufficient time to explore our discipline policies and procedures,” said Kathy Smith, chairman of the Fairfax County School Board, on the [FCPS](#) website. “We will schedule work sessions over the next three months to examine our values on student discipline and possibly recommend changes to the process.”

There will a School Board work session on Monday, March 14th that is open to the public and a Town Hall Meeting on the 19th at Falls Church High School.

Hemenway started the FZTR with other concerned parents, coaches, teachers, therapists, students back in 2006. She is a founding member of the Fairfax Education Coalition along with her co-director Janet Otersen and has worked with FAIRGRADE and SLEEP to better the lives of students in the FCPS area.

The mission of the Fairfax Zero Tolerance Reform is to “reform the Fairfax County Public School student disciplinary process so that EVERY child’s Constitutional, due process, and educational rights are protected; the process is restorative, just, consistent, individualized, transparent, monitored, and protects safe schools; and so it functions as intended.”

“There are very few student rights and there is no due process. Fairfax County takes a punitive and criminal approach to discipline. Unfortunately, it takes the deaths of two students for parents to get aware,” said Hemenway. “Disciplinary procedures should be therapeutic and the consequences should match the crime.”

Some argue that FCPS disciplinary procedures have impaired the lives of students, rather than help them. Stuban became isolated, moody, and was finally diagnosed with depression as stated in The Washington Post.

Hemenway draws light on why students choose to misbehave, “[They] live in gray and are faced with adults who wear black and white. Misbehavior happens because students aren’t in control. The lack of trust between administrators and students comes from the unfair treatment of kids. If students are not treated with respect, how can we expect them to?”

Students are suspended, expelled, and pushed out of their schools for misbehaving. Some argue that it hurts them by making them miss school, learn in a new environment, and it creates emotional trauma. “Teachers have to teach students who come back from suspension and this takes time away from other students. It serves nobody,” Hemenway said.

The director of FZTR also said that insufficient and vague data has led to in FCPS. “The data on infractions is not granular enough or specific enough for good policy decisions. An assault and an altercation were listed as the same infraction in 2009. The scope of the problem is not known.”

The FZTR states that any reform effort must “support the safety of schools, engage the community, eliminate suspension and expulsion as the cornerstone of disciplinary actions, promote policies that reflect evidence-based research, ensure that civil rights of students are protected, and reduce inconsistencies and eliminate discrimination in disciplinary practices.”


“It’ll take time and community engagement for a comprehensive job. It even may take a new school board,” said Hemenway on reform. “Students are key in our success. They need to be more educated about what their rights are.”

The growing resistance against harsh disciplinary procedures seems to be taking a hold and with the FZTR trailblazing the way.

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-  [Caroline Hemenway](#) Says:
[March 14th, 2011 at 4:44 pm](#)

Mr. Hoang, it was a pleasure having such a long interview with you and I appreciate the accuracy and scope of the story you wrote. Discipline policies in Fairfax are in dire need of review and reform. The school board work session today provided hope that the issues board members raised will be addressed, and they mirror our own (maybe because we did a little educating!)

There are just a couple of corrections, if I may, because we are basing every proposal and statement on facts, data, research, and best practices.

On the issue of assaults/altercations: these are separately defined. What I meant was that assaults AND altercations may include behavior of wide-ranging severity. Birthday punches, for example, may be assaults, along with kids who go to the ER with their teeth knocked out. They deserve different consequences.

Re trust: Just to clarify, ONE way trust is lost is when students and families lose faith that a system of justice – or discipline – is seriously unfair, as is the case here. There are others, but I’d say they pale in comparison.

I wanted to emphasize that we are totally in favor of zero tolerance for actual drugs, weapons, and violence in schools (we don’t mean fake drugs etc., either) — it is how we treat kids (ALL of them) that matters.

Finally, when speaking of students as keys to success, we mean that we want them INVOLVED in the reform effort. We invite them to join us (www.fairfaxzerotolerancereform.org), sign our petition (on website), come to our meetings, be part of the discussion on what needs to happen, what works, and what doesn’t. Any student (or teacher or others) interested should contact our outreach director, Sonia Mey-Schmidt, at outreachzerotolerance@gmail.com. Her son, Dante Verme, is available to talk with kids caught in the process as well.

Thank you for a well-done story!

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