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Posted at 1:25 PM ET, 03/11/2011

5 Myths about zero-tolerance disciplinary policies

By Valerie Strauss

Zero-tolerance policies have been popular for years in school districts around the country, often instituted on a set of assumptions that research shows are not true.

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My colleague Donna St. George has [chronicled](#) two cases in Fairfax County, the latest a girl forced out of her public school because she had prescription acne medicine in her locker, which underscores the problems with such policies. The [earlier case](#) involved a 15-year-old football player who wound up taking his own life after the fallout of an infraction. And St. George reported that there are a number of other cases in which parents questioned the penalty of their child's actions, calling it unduly harsh. The Fairfax School Board is planning to start a review of the system's discipline policies Monday.

Fairfax is hardly the only place this happens, of course; in New York City, a fourth-grader was suspended after putting a Post-it note that said "kick me" on a classmate. The girl was said not to have staged an ill-advised prank but to have been a bully.

Zero-tolerance policies are not the same everywhere, and there is no single definition for them. What they have in common is the application of preset consequences for behaviors, most often severe and punitive, intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, the situation a student finds themselves in or mitigating circumstances. The underlying idea is that this penalty system will serve as a deterrent.

The American Psychological Association put together a task force to research the effectiveness of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, and the panel [issued a report](#) titled, "Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations," published in the December 2008 American Psychologist.

It found that five common assumptions upon which zero-tolerance policies are often based are wrong. Here are the assumptions and what the report says is actually true:

ASSUMPTION #1: School violence is at a crisis level and increasing, thus necessitating forceful, no-nonsense strategies for violence prevention.

REALITY: Although any level of violence and disruption is unacceptable in schools and must be continually addressed in education, the evidence does not support an assumption that violence in schools is out of control or increasing. Incidents of critical and deadly violence remain a relatively small proportion of school

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