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Report: Schools zero-tolerance policy too harsh

January 14, 2011

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'Zero tolerance' failed city schools

April 12, 2011

By Shelly Yanoff

The recent Inquirer series on school violence showed that unsafe schools have serious consequences. But while the series identified the right problem, we must take care not to address it with the wrong solution.

We already know what doesn't work - including the district's current "zero tolerance" discipline policy. It's plagued by uneven application, long delays, and a general lack of common sense.

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Research shows that for all their tough rhetoric and political appeal, zero-tolerance policies do not make schools safer. The American Psychological Association has found that they reduce instructional time, bring more students into contact with the justice system, and increase dropout rates. The Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, the School District's task force on dropouts, the state Interbranch Commission on Juvenile Justice, and the federal government have all declared zero-tolerance policies ineffective.

As the Inquirer series showed, the district's zero-tolerance policy has not prevented serious incidents from going unreported. Meanwhile, it has led to referrals to the juvenile-justice system for minor infractions that could have been addressed within the schools.

Instead of wielding the sledgehammer of zero tolerance, schools must respond to disruptive and violent behavior with a continuum of intervention and support strategies. The district needs to develop a balanced approach that provides serious responses to harmful violence but doesn't unnecessarily criminalize minor infractions.

We know what works. Extensive research supports evidenced-based practices that improve the school culture, reduce violence, and keep kids in school, such as School-Wide Positive Behavior Support, restorative justice, bullying prevention, and increased use of school counselors.

Successful anti-violence programs in Philadelphia, some of which were highlighted by The Inquirer, should be expanded to serve all the city's schools. The district should also accurately track and report violence, teach and reward positive behavior, and ensure swift, appropriate responses to misbehavior. And none of that will work unless the district engages students and parents in the solutions and implements them consistently and for the long term.

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