

COMMENTARY

The Time Is Right to End 'Zero Tolerance' in Schools

By Gara LaMarche

It is too early to know whether the current wave of school reforms will lead to lasting improvements in student achievement. But it is not too early to note that many of these reforms have a troubling consequence: a doubling-down on harsh, ineffective zero-tolerance discipline policies. All too often, the debate about school reform has wrongly emphasized pushing troubled children out of school, rather than making systemic improvements so that all students have the support they need to learn.

For that reason, advocates nationwide are embracing efforts to improve school climate. School leaders are recognizing the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance. And as states grapple with untenable youth-prison budgets and Congress prepares to debate

reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a movement is building to end the ineffective, expensive, and tragic era of zero tolerance.

Nationwide, suspension and expulsion rates are at crisis levels. The most recent data from the National Center on Education Statistics showed that more than 3.3 million students were suspended or expelled in 2006—nearly one in 14. Of those, fewer than one in 10 were for violent offenses. The vast majority were for vague, noncriminal offenses, such as tardiness, talking back to a teacher, or violating dress codes.

For students of color, the crisis is even more extreme: In 2006, about 15 percent of black students were suspended, compared with 7 percent of Hispanic students and 5 percent of white students, according to NCEES data. That year, about 0.5 percent of blacks were expelled from school, compared with 0.2 percent of Hispanic students and 0.1 percent of white students. Many of these suspensions are the result of excessively punitive discipline policies. Mirroring tactics used in the adult criminal-justice system and the “war on drugs,” many school districts embraced practices that emphasize the long-term exclusion of students who violate school rules. Schools are relying more and more on the police and juvenile courts to address school-based behavior that used to be handled by educators.

In New York City, a recent analysis by the New York Civil Liberties Union revealed that suspensions of 4- to 10-year-olds have increased 76 percent since 2003.

In Colorado, two friends horsing around dented a locker and were charged with felony mischief and third-degree assault, according to the Washington-based Advancement Project.

In Virginia, a plastic pellet spit through a straw led to assault charges and expulsion, *The*

[← Back to Story](#)



"A movement is building to end the ineffective, expensive, and tragic era of zero tolerance."

Washington Post reported.

In a zero-tolerance school, that's it.

Sadly, zero-tolerance policies are as ineffective as they are prevalent. Research shows that they fail to improve student behavior. Even worse, these policies deny students access to desperately needed services, while dramatically increasing the likelihood of future involvement with the juvenile-justice system—especially for students of color.

This is what's known as the "school-to-prison pipeline." The United States now has the world's highest incarceration rate, and the number of juveniles in detention has swelled in recent decades. In the United States, more black men ages 18 to 24 live in prison cells than college dorm rooms, according to U.S. Census data.

Nationwide, some districts are implementing positive preventative approaches to school discipline. The programs vary, but all are based on similar principles:

- Creating respectful and welcoming school environments;
- Teaching positive behavior skills and conflict resolution; and
- Expanding access to academic and counseling services for children and families.

These programs equip students with essential skills, reducing their chances of entering the juvenile-justice system. And they cost less to implement than the cost of incarcerating a child in a juvenile-detention facility. Perhaps most importantly, these programs help all children learn better, not just the ones who may be struggling in school.

In Baltimore, a focus on positive discipline helped improve attendance and achievement rates among black males most at risk of dropping out. In Indiana and Louisiana, two states plagued by notoriously violent youth-prison systems, a shift is under way to discourage suspensions and expulsions. In Clayton County, Ga., and Birmingham, Ala., family-court judges led efforts to establish protocols between schools, law enforcement, and local service agencies that improved school attendance and decreased school-based referrals to the courts. This trend is promising.

This year, Congress is likely to take up the reauthorization of the ESEA, the federal government's main vehicle for helping to fund K-12 public education. The Obama administration's blueprint for the ESEA, which the president laid out last year, maintains an emphasis on testing in promoting school accountability.

On the one hand, standardized testing seems to have exposed the poor quality of education in many of our nation's schools and the urgent need for reform. But the increasing pressure to raise test scores also has encouraged the practice of pushing "problem" children out of school. This is not the fault of educators—it is the product of a set of systemic incentives.

The reauthorization of the ESEA is a critical moment for discipline reform. Abolishing zero tolerance is essential to closing the door on the school-to-prison pipeline, and creates an opportunity for a frank national conversation about what schools can and should be doing to support achievement—especially for children of color.

At the state level, the budget crises gripping governments have led to reform. In New York

and California, new governors are pledging to shut most youth prisons, investing instead in more effective alternatives that will reduce school-based arrests and referrals into the juvenile-justice system.

At the local level, students and parents are coming together to demand an end to zero tolerance. A recent report, "**Zero Tolerance in Philadelphia**," was co-authored by the student-led Youth United for Change and the Advancement Project. The report received significant national media attention, and many observers said they were inspired by the students' passion to advocate on their own behalf.

These efforts are supported by national advocacy organizations, including the **Dignity in Schools** coalition, the **Alliance for Educational Justice**, and the Advancement Project, which are calling for federal action to improve discipline data collection and monitoring and to provide resources to help districts adopt more effective strategies for improving discipline.

My organization, The AtlanticPhilanthropies, is investing in this national push for positive discipline alternatives by promoting federal advocacy while supporting efforts such as those in Philadelphia, where the people most affected are organizing against zero tolerance. Through the Just and Fair Schools fund at the New York-based nonprofit Public Interest Projects, we now fund 21 grassroots organizing groups that are working to improve discipline practices in 14 states.

Our long-term goals are to reduce expulsion and suspension rates, raise achievement, and dramatically reduce the pernicious disparities affecting students of color. We hope our support will inspire other funders to step forward at this critical moment.

Nearly 10 years ago, to deepen my understanding of criminal-justice reform, I spent a sabbatical volunteering at a prison re-entry program for convicted felons. What struck me was how many of these men had made one mistake—as children—and their education simply stopped. This is wrong.

Our hope is that starting now—with the ESEA reauthorization, budget cuts, and burgeoning activism unfolding in front of us—philanthropists, educators, and policymakers will come together to end these ineffective, expensive, and morally corrupt policies, and work to create safe and positive climates in schools that give every student a fair chance to learn.

Gara LaMarche is the president of The Atlantic Philanthropies, which is based in New York City.

