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MULTIPLE RESPONSES, PROMISING RESULTS: EVIDENCE-BASED, NONPUNITIVE ALTERNATIVES TO ZERO TOLERANCE

Christopher Boccanfuso, Ph.D., and Megan Kuhfeld, B.S.

OVERVIEW

In response to highly publicized violent incidents in schools, such as the Columbine High School massacre, school disciplinary policies have become increasingly severe. These policies have been implemented at the school, district, and state levels with the goal of ensuring the safety of students and staff. Many of these policies have one component in common: zero tolerance. While it is clear that protecting the safety of students and staff is one of school leaders' most important responsibilities, it is not clear that zero tolerance policies are succeeding in improving school safety. In fact, some evidence based on nonexperimental studies suggests that these policies actually may have an adverse effect on student academic and behavioral outcomes.

Child Trends developed this brief to explore these issues. The brief does this in two ways: it reviews existing research on the implementation and effects of zero tolerance in the school setting; and it highlights rigorously evaluated, nonpunitive alternatives to zero tolerance that have shown greater promise in improving school safety and student outcomes. Nonpunitive programs that take a largely preventive approach to school discipline have been found to keep students and schools safe by reducing the need for harsh discipline. These programs take many forms, such as targeted behavioral supports for students who are at-risk for violent behavior, character education programs, or positive behavioral interventions and supports that are instituted schoolwide.

WHAT IS ZERO TOLERANCE?

Zero tolerance is the most widely implemented and scrutinized school discipline policy in the United States. A zero tolerance policy assigns explicit, predetermined punishments to specific violations of school rules, regardless of the situation or context of the behavior. In many cases, punishment for a violation under the policy is severe, such as suspension or expulsion from school. In theory, zero tolerance deters students from violent or illegal behavior because the punishment for such a violation is harsh and certain.⁵⁰

Zero tolerance was originally applied to the criminal justice system as an approach to enforcing drug laws. It became widely adopted in schools during the 1990s and 2000s, ironically as it was becoming viewed less favorably in the criminal justice system. Zero tolerance has been implemented nationwide through the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, which mandates a one-year

expulsion for students who have been determined to have brought a firearm or any instrument that can be used as a weapon to school. Many school districts have adopted more expansive variations of the policy that cover numerous other violations, such as bullying, fighting, using drugs or alcohol, and even swearing or wearing “banned” types of clothing.⁴⁸ While specific zero tolerance policies vary by school, at least 79 percent of schools nationwide had adopted these policies towards alcohol, drugs, and violence by 1997.^{19,53} These policies also vary in terms of how expelled or suspended students are treated while away from school. Only 26 states require alternative educational assignments for expelled or suspended students, and—in many cases—the education received in these alternative assignments is not as rigorous as the education that the students would have received in their neighborhood schools.¹⁷

THE EFFECTS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF ZERO TOLERANCE

Although zero tolerance policies have been implemented nationwide, little rigorous research exists that examines the impact of such policies. There are two major reasons for this situation. One, zero tolerance policies are implemented and carried out in many different ways, making comparisons across schools difficult. And, two, the sensitive nature of school discipline practices and incidents makes it hard to secure the necessary cooperation from schools and districts to perform experimental research.

Despite the lack of rigorous research on this subject, existing case studies and analyses of suspension and expulsion data at the local level suggest that zero tolerance policies are not deterring misbehavior. In Tennessee, the number of drug and violent offenses in schools increased substantially over the first three years of a statewide implementation of zero tolerance policy.⁴⁵ Furthermore, research has indicated that bullying is still rampant in many of the nation’s schools. Approximately one in five elementary and middle school students admits to bullying his or her peers periodically.³⁵ Unfortunately, researchers have not examined rates of misbehavior or suspension on a national level for schools with zero tolerance policies.

Even as the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies is being questioned, educational research has found a strong link between the types of punishment associated with these policies—suspension and expulsion—and a host of negative outcomes. Being suspended from school significantly increases the likelihood of subsequent suspension or expulsion.⁴⁰ Students who receive a suspension in middle or high school are also significantly less likely to graduate on time and are more likely to drop out.³ Higher suspension rates have also been found to be related to lower school-wide academic achievement and standardized test scores, even when controlling for factors such as race and socioeconomic status.^{18,47,49-51}

Psychological and educational research have examined the connection between punishment under zero tolerance policies and negative outcomes.¹ Psychological research has suggested that suspension and expulsion are likely to further reinforce negative behavior by denying students opportunities for positive socialization in school and nurturing a distrust of adults, both of which inhibit adolescent development.^{1,12,25-27} Educational research has suggested that school discipline policies are related to student engagement. Students who trust their teachers, and feel that their teachers are respectful, fair, and attentive, are more likely to form bonds with and perform well in school.^{11,60} By restricting the ability of school staff to put student actions into context in some cases, zero tolerance policies can inhibit the formation of school bonds.³⁴ Questions also have

been raised about the appropriateness of these policies for preventing bullying. The concern is that threats of severe punishment—such as suspension or expulsion—may actually deter children and adults from reporting bullying that they observe.⁵³

Not only do zero tolerance policies vary greatly among schools, but the implementation of these policies to specific offenses is also inconsistent.¹⁷ For example, under a school that has a zero tolerance policy for violence, a student who is bullied may face the same suspension for retaliating in a physical altercation as the bully who initiated the confrontation. At the classroom level, it is often left to the discretion of a staff member to determine what constitutes a threat or a violent act that falls under the zero tolerance policy. In some widely publicized instances, this discretion has led to severe and often unnecessary punishment as a result of an action being classified as a zero tolerance offense.^{17,48} One recent case involved a seven-year-old boy in Florida who was expelled from school for having a clear, plastic toy gun in his backpack.⁴⁴ A recent U. S. Department of Education report indicated that nationally, a surprising percentage of students expelled based on a violation of the Gun Free Schools Act—42 percent—were expelled from elementary or middle schools.⁵⁴

Part of the appeal of zero tolerance is that by removing the effects of background factors in assigning punishment, groups of students that traditionally have been overrepresented in receiving suspensions or expulsions within schools will be treated fairly. At least, that is the intent. However, research has consistently indicated that disproportionate percentages of African American, Latino (to a lesser extent), disabled, and poor students are suspended and expelled in schools with zero tolerance policies. More sophisticated analyses have indicated that this disproportion is not due to higher rates of disruption or violence among these groups.^{1,50} Minority students are also more likely to be in schools that rely heavily on harsh disciplinary practices.^{36,40,50,61}

Although no studies have specifically examined the causes of suspension or expulsion within schools or districts that practice zero tolerance, case studies on school suspension indicate that the majority of suspensions are for offenses that do not involve weapons and are nonviolent. Research using the administrative data of a large urban school district found that attendance issues, insubordination, and classroom disruption were leading causes of suspension, with fighting and bullying making up 19 percent of suspensions.⁴⁷ An analysis of suspensions across one Midwestern state indicated that weapons and drug offenses made up only 5 percent of suspensions.⁴⁹

In sum, the implementation of zero tolerance policies is widespread, despite a lack of research evidence that such policies are effective. These policies have been implemented in many forms, with staff interpreting the policies in many different ways. Because of the variation in the scope and interpretation of these policies among schools, coupled with the lack of rigorous evaluations of these policies, no conclusions can be drawn on their impacts nationally. However, the existing research using urban school district data and case studies shows no evidence that zero tolerance policies decrease school violence. Further, these policies may be related to negative impacts in cases in which students are suspended, expelled, or attend a school with especially harsh policies.

ALTERNATIVES TO ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES

Although many schools have adopted ZT policies in order to stem increases in violence, misbehavior or drug use, some schools have adopted nonpunitive approaches to deal with these problems. These programs emphasize social, behavioral, and cognitive skill-building; character education; or targeted behavioral supports for students who are at risk for violent or illegal behavior. In contrast to the lack of rigorous research about the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies, several experimental or quasi-experimental program evaluations indicate that programs using a nonpunitive approach to school discipline have had positive impacts on student behavior and academic achievement.

Targeted Behavioral Supports for At-Risk Students

Several programs that target the behavior of at-risk students have been supported through randomized controlled trial or quasi-experimental program evaluations.ⁱ These programs include **Reconnecting Youth, Cognitive-Behavioral Training Program for Behaviorally Disordered Adolescents, Coping Power, First Step to Success,** and **School Based Intervention to Reduce Aggressive Behavior in Maladjusted Adolescents.**ⁱⁱ Instead of examining each of these programs in depth, this section outlines common components of effective targeted programs, and highlights two programs with strong empirical support indicating that they work.

Programs that provide targeted, rigorously evaluated behavioral supports for at-risk students have several elements in common. Most notably, these programs typically involve program leaders engaging students in daily or weekly exercises to build social skills. These exercises, which generally are interactive, are designed to help students learn to listen, manage their anger, resolve conflicts, and practice and develop other social skills that can enable them to minimize instances of negative behavior. The other distinguishing feature of many of these programs is individualized behavioral support. Targeted behavioral support programs for at-risk students generally consist of small-group or one-on-one training sessions. Many effective behavioral supports also help students develop individualized anger management plans for dealing with the specific sources of stress or anger in their lives. These individualized interventions often involve trusted family members as well. By involving family members in these plans, targeted behavioral support programs educate family members about the sources of the student's negative behavior and help them to reinforce the lessons learned during training sessions.

ⁱ A randomized controlled trial is an experimental research model in which subjects (for our purposes, individual students or groups of students in classrooms or schools) are randomly assigned before the start of the experiment to a treatment group, which receives an intervention, or a control group, which does not. Random assignment results in groups that are similar on average in both observable and unobservable characteristics and any differences in outcomes between the two groups are due to the intervention alone, within a known degree of statistical precision. Quasi-experimental research also involves a treatment and control group. Unlike a randomized controlled trial, group assignment is not random, meaning that this type of research must demonstrate that the treatment and control groups are equivalent on observable characteristics. Even with equivalence on observable characteristics, differences may exist in unobservable characteristics.

ⁱⁱ See Child Trends' LINKS Database for descriptions of these and other experimentally evaluated programs (<http://www.childtrends.org/Links>).

Reconnecting Youth is a program designed for high school students who have demonstrated problems such as aggression, substance abuse, or depression. Since its inception in 1985, the program has been implemented in all 50 states, serving hundreds of thousands of students. Moreover, it has been adopted by several states as an evidence-based program, meaning that states recommend the program to school districts and provide funding to support its implementation.³⁹ The goals of the program are to increase school performance, decrease drug involvement, and improve mood management. The means is a one-semester daily class that students are invited to attend. The curriculum covered in the class promotes school bonds and healthy activities, involves parents in student lives, and helps students develop a “crisis response plan” to help deal with adversity. Experimental evaluations found that students who completed the class had lower rates of alcohol use, drug use, and school dropout than students who did not participate 10 months after program completion. Students in the program also exhibited decreases in anger control problems and aggressive tendencies.^{15,22,23}

Cognitive-Behavioral Training Program for Behaviorally Disordered Adolescents is a school-based program designed to help students improve their self-control and reduce the frequency of aggressive or violent behavior. The program consists of twelve 30-to-40 minute lessons intended to help students develop a sequential strategy for dealing with problems in a nonviolent way. Lessons allow for opportunities for students to discuss and practice parts of their strategies. An experimental evaluation of the program examined outcomes for 24 students between the ages of 12 and 18 who had behavioral disorders. It found that students who were assigned to the program exhibited increased self-control and a decreased frequency of aggressive behavior, compared with students in the control group.¹³

Character Education and Social-Emotional Learning Programs

Several character education and social-emotional learning programs have had significant, positive impacts on school safety by taking a preventive approach to violence and substance-related school offenses. Character education programs have been defined as “programs that deliberately attempt to develop students’ character by teaching core values and that had most if not all of their lesson plans or prescribed activities directly related to instilling those values.”⁵⁹ It is these values that help students to avoid negative behaviors. Social-emotional learning programs have been described as programs that aid “the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to recognize and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations effectively.” There is a great deal of overlap between the goals of these two types of programs; consequently, many programs have been characterized as both character education programs and social-emotional learning programs.²¹

Hundreds of character education and social-emotional learning programs have been implemented in schools across the country; however, many are small in scope and have not been evaluated. A synthesis of results from existing rigorous evaluations of character education and social-emotional learning programs indicates that, in general, these programs have had significant, positive impacts on building social and emotional skills; adjusting behavior; reducing aggression and conduct problems; and increasing academic performance across grade levels, ability levels, racial/ethnic groups, and locales.^{5,21,42}

Although dozens of character education and social-emotional programs have been evaluated, few have been evaluated using experimental methods. The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), an initiative of the U. S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, is a central source of rigorously reviewed scientific evidence for what works in education.ⁱⁱⁱ Of the 41 character education programs with experimental evaluations that were studied by the WWC in 2006, only 13 had evaluations that were rigorous enough to meet the clearinghouse’s criteria. Of those 13 programs, six were identified by WWC as having positive effects in the realm of behavior: **Positive Action, Connect with Kids, Caring School Community, Skills for Adolescence, Too Good for Drugs, and Too Good for Violence.**^{iv} Three of these programs are highlighted below. Other syntheses of findings about experimentally evaluated character education programs have identified dozens of additional programs that have had a positive impact on student behavior, social skills, or academic achievement.

A recently released study by the National Center for Educational Research (NCER) outlined NCER’s experimental analysis of seven character education or social-emotional learning programs, including Positive Action. The study found few consistent, significant positive impacts on children throughout the three-year study period. However, four of the seven programs examined, including Positive Action, did have statistically or substantively significant positive impacts on student behavior in at least one year.⁵²

Character education and social-emotional learning programs that build character strengths, reduce aggression, and improve academic outcomes have several common elements. Effective programs often include teaching units that focus on social skills or awareness (such as being able to communicate with and to listen to others); self-management skills; and decision making skills. In effective programs, these teaching units are sequenced so that specific types of skills taught in one unit can build on the skills taught in the previous one. Overall, character education programs that include even one unit that focuses on helping students develop specific personal or social skills have been shown to be effective in reducing problem behaviors.²¹

An interactive teaching strategy is another common thread that runs through effective character education and social-emotional learning programs. The Character Education Partnership has identified 33 experimentally or quasi-experimentally evaluated programs that have been found to be effective in preventing risky behaviors, improving positive social or social-emotional competencies, or improving school outcomes. Each of these programs has employed highly interactive teaching strategies, including mentoring, role-playing exercises, or group discussion.^{5,21,42,43} Research disseminated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning also has found that social and emotional learning programs that used active forms of learning tended to have a greater effect on increasing students’ positive behaviors.²¹

Many character education and social-emotional learning programs also make use of role models or mentors to convey lessons about strong character. For example, teachers may explicitly

ⁱⁱⁱ See *WWC Evidence Review Protocol for Character Education Interventions* for details on the types of research that met WWC evidence standards (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/CharEd_protocol.pdf).

^{iv} The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (www.casel.org) and Child Trends (<http://www.childtrends.org/Links>) have also identified several rigorously evaluated character education programs that have a positive impact on social, emotional and academic development.

explain how they draw on certain character strengths or avoid risky behavior in their daily lives, or students may learn about an inspirational figure from the past or present who embodies the type of behavior or character strengths that the program emphasizes. Effective programs may also promote family or community involvement as a way to encourage parents to carry out the mission of character education at home. This involvement can take several forms, such as getting involved in extracurricular character education activities, signing up for parent training, or helping to develop community awareness about character education programs.^{5,21,42}

Positive Action is a K-12 program that has been adopted in more than 11,000 schools over the last 35 years. It promotes character development, academic achievement, and social-emotional skill-building. The curriculum for the program consists of six or seven units, which feature discussion, role playing, games, songs, and activity sheets. Optional units of the program include drug education, conflict resolution training, counseling, parent and family classes, and community outreach. Two studies that met WWC reporting standards both found that students who complete Positive Action in elementary school have significantly reduced rates of suspension, substance abuse, violence, and grade retention in middle and high school.^{5,16,42,58} Other experimental studies of Positive Action have demonstrated that this program had a positive impact on building social-emotional skills and curbing negative behavior in middle and high school. The recently published NCER experimental study of Positive Action found that it significantly reduced problem behaviors and increased positive social behavior and student support for teachers by the second year of the program.⁵²

Too Good for Violence is designed to promote elementary and middle school students' social skills and positive character traits and to improve school climate by creating schoolwide standards for nonviolent behavior. The program has been implemented in more than 2,500 school districts since its inception in 2000. The curriculum consists of seven or nine core lessons and optional community and parent involvement activities. Students engage in role playing and cooperative learning and are encouraged to apply the resulting skills learned to different contexts. Two studies of the program that met WWC reporting standards were based on information obtained about a sample of 1,000 students attending 10 elementary schools in Florida. Results from these studies showed that Too Good for Violence had a positive impact on students' behavior, social skills (such as peer resistance), and attitudes towards nonviolence upon completion of the program.^{2,57}

Connect with Kids is a character education program aimed at promoting positive behavior and social attitudes among students in grades 3 through 12. The program was founded in 1998 and is now implemented in hundreds of schools across the country, including those in Washington, D.C., New York City, Los Angeles, and Miami. The classroom curriculum for the program includes videos, story summaries, discussion questions, games, and student activities. This curriculum is supplemented by video specials that can be viewed on television or online and are designed for parents and students to watch together. A 2005 study looked at the effect of Connect for Kids on a sample of about 800 elementary, middle, and high school students in eight school districts. It found that participation in the program had substantial, positive impacts on the students' behavior, most notably in the areas of responsibility, self-control, and tolerance.^{41,56}

School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support

School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) represents another approach to combating school violence and student misbehavior that has demonstrated positive results in randomized controlled trial research. This initiative has been adopted by more than 13,000 schools nationwide, making it one of the most widely used positive behavior support endeavors in the nation. Unlike other nonpunitive programs, it is not a curriculum but a multi-tiered approach to school discipline—three tiers, in particular.^{7,38} The primary tier of prevention consists of defining and teaching behavioral expectations, rewarding positive behavior, providing a continuum of possible consequences for problem behavior, and collecting data for decision making purposes. The secondary tier of prevention is designed for students who are at-risk for behavior problems or displaying early signs of behavior problems; it consists of targeted interventions that are consistent with the schoolwide behavioral expectations. The third tier of prevention is implemented to support children with more serious behavior problems; it includes more intense, individualized intervention, often with family or community involvement, as guided by a functional behavioral assessment.²⁸

Several studies have examined the implementation and impact of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports across all grade levels. Recently released experimental studies have found a link between the use of this approach at the elementary school level and students' improved academic performance, better social behavior, and reductions in referrals to the principal's office for discipline problems.^{9,29} Implementation studies have found that School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports can be implemented with fidelity across grade levels.^{4,8-10,29,30,32,33,37,40} Moreover, studies have identified schools that have sustained the approach for nearly a decade.^{20,30}

As David Osher (2010) points out, School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and character education programs differ in their methods for preventing violence and substance-related offenses.⁴⁰ School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports focuses explicitly on preventing misbehavior and uses data to inform discipline, whereas character education programs focus on building positive character traits and social skills, which in turn prevents misbehavior. Osher has suggested that programs such as **Best Behavior, Project Achieve**, and **PeaceBuilders**, which incorporate elements of both types of approaches, enhance the power of each.

PeaceBuilders is a schoolwide program for students in grades K through 12 that is designed to prevent youth violence and reward positive behavior. The program has been implemented in more than 1,200 schools and organizations nationwide over the last 10 years. Children in the program learn five principles: seek out opportunities to praise people; avoid put-downs; seek wise people as advisors and friends; notice and correct hurts we cause; and right wrongs. Participants also learn nine techniques that can be used to reinforce these principles by using teachers as role models, practicing positive behavior through role playing, and rehearsing positive responses to negative events. Two experimental evaluations of **PeaceBuilders** in eight Pima County, Arizona, elementary schools indicated that the program increased social skills and peaceful behavior and decreased aggressive behavior in students one year after they completed

the program. The impact of PeaceBuilders was largest for students who scored higher on measures of aggression at the start of the intervention.^{14,24,55}

CONCLUSION

Two important responsibilities of any school administrator are providing the safest possible school environment and reducing the frequency of negative student behaviors. To meet these goals, many schools have adopted zero tolerance policies towards infractions ranging from weapons violations to bullying to not following instructions. Although these policies are popular among staff members and parents if they fear for students' safety (as well, sometimes, for their own), surprisingly little research exists that examines the effectiveness of this approach. In some instances, such as incidents of bullying, some observers have suggested that zero tolerance policies may actually deter other students from coming forward and identifying the offending student. However, it is far too early to come to any definitive conclusions about the impacts of zero tolerance policies in the school setting.^{1,6,46}

This brief has highlighted several effective, nonpunitive alternatives to zero tolerance. Nonpunitive approaches towards negative behavior—such as targeted behavioral supports for at-risk students—have been shown to reduce violent behavior in school. Other alternatives to zero tolerance that take a largely preventive approach to violence and misbehavior—such as character education or social-emotional learning programs and School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports—have also been shown through rigorous, experimental evaluations to have significant, positive impacts on student behaviors, as well as on academic achievement in some cases.

Zero tolerance policies evolved from a belief among some educators and parents that a failure to strongly punish misbehavior sends a message that their school is not serious about the safety of students and staff. Some stakeholders use these policies out of concern that nonpunitive interventions may allow disruptive students to remain in the classroom and prevent other students from learning.^{31,50} While some of the alternatives to zero tolerance discussed in this brief may require additional human and financial resources, many nonpunitive and preventive approaches to school violence and student misbehavior hold great promise. These approaches not only help to prevent or minimize negative behaviors, but also promote positive youth development and skills that will help students in the classroom and beyond.

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