

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOLS

ACTIONABLE SOLUTIONS¹

"Without a clear reordering of priorities, the zero-tolerance movement will not reach its goals; instead it will only increase the alienation of youth from the adult world and detrimentally segregate many at-risk youth from their peers"
(Noam, Warner, & Van Dyken, 2001, p.156)

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES

"The root of the word *Discipline* comes from the Greek word *Discipere*, to teach or comprehend" (Skiba, 2010, p.2). Discipline policies must shift from reactive to proactive if we want to end the school-to-prison pipeline. As adults, we have a responsibility to provide all youth with the necessary "life tools." We must commit to educating rather than punishing.

If the purpose of schooling is to educate students, why are we removing them from schools for minor infractions? The only purpose zero tolerance policies serve is to "...help to reassure the school organization and the community at-large that strong actions are being taken in response to a perceived breakdown of school order" (Kajs, 2006, p.20). Educators must shift their thinking and restructure discipline policies that function to help students develop more appropriate behavior rather than trying to control and contain those displaying poor behavior. Zero tolerance policies create negative, unsafe school environments in that "blind enforcement of consequences without regard to individual circumstances may make students even less likely to adhere to school rules as they come to see their fate as not in their control and simultaneously lose faith in the fairness of adults and the school policies adults have imposed" (Noam, Warner, & Van Dyke, 2001, p.157).

The following table outlines two discipline paradigms; a positive, strength focused model is on the left side and the right side portrays zero tolerance discipline policies. If we want to stop further oppression of youth in society, rigid discipline policies that focus on removing students from the learning environment must be ended.

¹ From the website *Adulthood and the Criminalization of Students in Schools*. This section accessed 13 Nov 2016 at <http://957414677668313364.weebly.com/actionable-solutions.html>

Table 1: A Contrast of Paradigms

<p style="text-align: center;">Enlisting <i>Strength-Based, Student Empowering</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Insisting <i>Shame-Based, Student Inhibiting</i></p>
<p>*Goal & Prevailing Focus: Developing critical thinkers and problem solvers.</p>	<p>*Goal & Prevailing Focus: Meeting imposed academic/behavioral standards and maintaining order.</p>
<p>Problems are OPPORTUNITIES. Adult interactions with students reinforce faith in students' abilities to solve problems.</p>	<p>Problems are TROUBLE. Adults' interactions with students show little/no faith in students' ability to solve problems.</p>
<p>Rules are FEW. Adults value student opinions, work to help students solve problems, and teach critical thinking skills.</p>	<p>Rules are ABUNDANT. Rules promote conformity, mask problem-solving deficiencies, impede student learning.</p>
<p>Student feedback about and criticism of the environment is elicited and valued.</p>	<p>Feedback on the environment is limited primarily to adults.</p>
<p>Student government tackles real life problems, works to improve environment.</p>	<p>Student government is adult controlled, and tasks focus on event planning.</p>
<p>Social Status: Adults/students recognize helpfulness and contribution of students.</p>	<p>Social Status: Bestowed by adults upon "gifted" students and those who conform.</p>
<p>Community Service: "Service Learning" is viewed as an exercise to promote empathy, citizenship, and community living skills.</p>	<p>Community Service: Intermittent activities reserved for most capable students or associated with "restitution" for one's antisocial actions.</p>
<p>Adult vernacular regarding students is respectful, hopeful, and encouraging.</p>	<p>Adult vernacular regarding students is demeaning, intolerant, or discouraging.</p>

*Authors' premise: Both goals can be accomplished by utilizing enlisting strategies.

(Tate & Copas, 2003, p.43)

A FOCUS ON PREVENTATIVE SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Positive-Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) <http://www.pbis.org/>

- * Systemic, multi-tiered, school-wide
- * Recommended by the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education
- * Specifically teaches and reinforces expected behavior
- * Data driven interventions and supports

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends school-wide prevention programs, such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS), rather than harsh zero tolerance policies that perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of youth. *"In order to develop as citizens, school age children must learn how to work through conflicts and be given multiple opportunities to correct poor behavior. Strong and trusting relationships with adults that are not based solely on authoritarian models and social control are vital to these processes"* (Noam, Warner, & Van Dyke, 2001, p.156).

Without a prevention program in place, zero tolerance policies are completely ineffective and tend to create further problems (Skiba, 2004). Noam, Warner, and Van Dyken (2001) advocate for creating schools that *"pull-in"* services rather than *"push-out"* students. We must provide students with the necessary skills to succeed in and out of the classroom. Using a multi-tiered model to *"pull-in"* services school wide, PBIS provides a caring and supportive learning environment that focuses on building academic, behavioral, and social-emotional skills for all students. PBIS is an alternative, proactive discipline approach utilizing behavior intervention plans, behavioral contracts, incident debriefing, collaborative problem solving, parent correspondence, in-door lunch/recess and suspensions are only considered for severe incidents (Netzel & Eber, 2003).

TRUST BETWEEN CHILD AND ADULT IS ESSENTIAL

Successful preventative discipline programs always include developing positive adult-student relationships. "The surgeon general's report on youth violence...found that commitment to school was one of only two protective buffers against specific risk factors for violence," furthermore, "...school connectedness, defined as students' feeling part of and cared for at school, is linked with lower levels of substance abuse, violence, suicide attempts, pregnancy, and emotional distress" (Wald & Losen, 2003, p.12).

Dr. Glasser's Quality Schools: <http://wglasser.com/the-glasser-approach/quality-schools>

- * Leading students rather than coercing
- * Relationships built with staff and students are based on trust and respect
- * Cooperative learning approach

Dr. William Glasser (1999), developed Reality Theory (also known as Choice Theory), used in youth and adult counseling. From this counseling model, he developed The Quality School program to help educators change the way they interact and discipline youth. A core belief of Dr. Glasser's (1999) framework is that the use of external control, i.e. coercive discipline policies, damages relationships between people (students and teachers), increasing the likelihood of future issues. Noam, Warner, and Van Dyken (2001) further suggest that "violence in schools often results because of a loss of connection and respect between teachers and students due to coercive structures that foster environments of mistrust and resistance" (p.158). Dr. Glasser (1999) argues that educators must focus on developing positive relationships with their students as a first step to combating poor classroom behavior. Building positive relationships with students, is something we as educators can do immediately while we advocate for larger systemic change to stop the oppression of youth.

IMPLEMENTATION: PROCESS, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to implement programs such as PBIS or shift the school's climate toward that of Dr. Glasser's (1999) Quality Schools, educators must advocate for systemic change at the building level (i.e. principal) or at the district level (i.e. administrators). Possible stakeholders in the systemic change of school discipline policies include all levels of school officials, students, parents, tax payers, community mental health resources, & local law enforcement.

Without the support of the school building principal or the administrators in the school district, discipline policies in the school will not change. Educators and administrators must "buy into" the rationale behind using proactive interventions in decreasing poor student behavior in schools and the importance of nurturing adult relationships; this requires a significant theoretical change for many. "Placing pressure on leaders to move beyond the simplistic rhetoric of zero tolerance and getting the 'disruptive kids out of class' to address these complex problems and glaring racial disparities with compassion, care, knowledge, and determination will not be easy," which is something advocates must be prepared to confront when working toward systemic change of discipline policies (Wald & Losen, 2003, p.14).

Once the building or district has committed to changing its discipline policies, school officials must collaborate as a team for the successful implementation of a new policy. Team collaboration is essential because systemic change requires change from everyone involved in the system. Teske (2011) explains that collaboration among individuals is vital in the change process, this unfortunately, can also create significant barriers. Additionally, this process requires additional resources in the form of curricula and training, which presents an even greater challenge to the already underfunded educational system we have in place.

It is likely that changing discipline policies will take considerable amount of time due to the many challenges and barriers that come along with systemic change.

If implementing a prevention program is not an option due to lack of funding, resistance from educators or administrators, etc., schools are recommended to at least limit the use of law enforcement and to examine the discipline policies currently in place, and determine if they are being applied fairly and appropriately (Advancement Project, 2010). Kajs (2006) suggests that as long as discipline "...is applied fairly, and appropriately, [discipline] can positively influence character development and establish an environment of safety in the school community" (p.18).

To reduce unfair and inappropriate discipline within a school/district, Kajs (2006) recommends that school officials use professional judgement and examine the following areas of each student when determining discipline procedures:

- 1) age, gender, grade level
- 2) special education
- 3) offense's seriousness
- 4) circumstances surrounding offense
- 5) prior history of offenses
- 6) student's attitude and social-emotional development level
- 7) overall offense on school members and community at large
- 8) resiliency level (grade point average, extracurricular activities, supportive relationship with adult)

Educators must, at the least, move away from a "one-size-fits-all" policy. Educators must be given the opportunity to examine each incident and the circumstances surrounding the incident when determining consequences.

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