



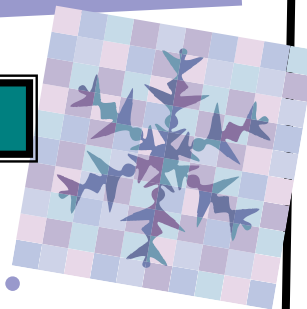
# Viewpoint

Winter 2004



## Is Zero Tolerance Becoming Intolerant?

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In response to youth violence and drug use, communities throughout the nation have adopted a zero tolerance policy designed to make schools safer. In a nutshell, students caught in possession of a weapon or drug (including paraphernalia) are removed from campus and placed in an alternative education program or juvenile justice facility, and either arrested or issued a citation. The message is clear; there is no tolerance for things that threaten our students' welfare. Whatever it takes to be safe is worth the price.



strategy have unexpected negative outcomes? Does the end result always justify the means, or are schools and communities inadvertently throwing the baby out with the bath water? What appears at first glance to be a sound position of safety and security for our children, has for many become in itself a problem needing to be addressed. The cure may be worse than the bite. According to the Indiana Youth Services Association, fifteen years after the rise of zero tolerance ... there is still no credible evidence that zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions are an effective method for changing student behavior.

due process is suspended. A broadly cast net will catch everything in its reach. Yet, that isn't the purpose of fishing. Students of color have consistently been found to be suspended at rates two to three times that of other students, and similarly

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There seems to be no debate on the merit and intention of zero tolerance. The safety and wellbeing of our children is paramount. But, can a well-intentioned

This Viewpoint is not an attempt to discredit zero tolerance. If anything, it is an attempt to strengthen the posture, by making it more realistic and effective. Right now, the "letter of the law" seems to be well enforced. It is time to embrace the "spirit" as well. Suspending a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader because of a plastic knife in a lunch pail, a high school student for being overheard claiming he used PHP (a computer term), or a middle school student because his mother gave him a medicine that was prescribed to her, seem questionable if not downright foolish. These aren't isolated incidents. It seems that in some cases, zero tolerance has resulted in a rigid, unyielding, reaction, where

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Across the country, parent groups are pushing for a more common sense approach. At the National Student Assistance Association, we believe that zero tolerance has been at times interpreted in such a way

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as to be counter-productive to the original intent. The need for school safety is not in debate.

Providing an environment conducive to academic success and personal growth is at the core NSAA's mission. Zero Tolerance must be balanced with common sense and rational thinking. Students resent arbitrary enforcement of rules and tend to believe that suspension and expulsion are used unfairly against certain groups. It must be done with compassion and understanding, and in a way that fosters a willingness to accept or seek help, if needed. Deterrence of violence or drug possession is very worthy of our support. So is addressing the cause, or getting to the "why". An effective zero tolerance contains both deterrent and intervention strategies.

Providing help to students does not make the policy weaker. It should in fact reduce recidivism, making the policy stronger. Having a zero tolerance policy doesn't keep problems from coming to school, no matter how vigorous it is in its wording. How a school responds to various and different situations is key to whether or not zero tolerance works. Surely, we can teach our children the value of having a safe and drug-free school without resorting to a "one size fits all reaction". Our children need to see that the laws and rules imposed on them are balanced



with common sense and a respect for extenuating circumstances. The punishment needs to fit the crime. As Abraham Lincoln said in a speech in 1865, "*I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice*". It is the *richer fruits* that we are most interested in after all.

When a legitimate threat to a school's safety occurs, a swift and calculated response is needed. Any time a student possesses a weapon, it needs to be dealt with severely.

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Possession of drugs, whether with intent to sell or use, should be dealt with in a way that removes drugs from school. NSAA supports the use of alternative settings for students in violation of the school's zero tolerance policy.

We stand in support of teachers and students having a safe place to work and learn. We also support the use of the SAP to help students get connected to services that can deal with the issues that may contribute towards violence or drug use. But, for students with an aspirin, or a toy wooden baseball bat being treated like someone possessing a knife or cocaine misses the intent of zero tolerance. Like any valuable tool, knowing when to use it makes all the difference between success and failure.

**I**n summary, zero tolerance is very much needed. But, it needs to be expanded to accomplish three things; 1) promote a safer school with clear



and relevant consequences, 2) help students who violate the policy get help (in addition to receiving consequences), and 3) discriminate between cases that do and do not merit a zero tolerance reaction. We need to bring common sense to the table. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said in 1841, "*Nothing astonishes men so much as common sense and plain dealing.*" It has a way of balancing things out. At a time when students, teachers, and administrators are being asked to reach higher, accomplish more, and achieve what no generation of America has ever achieved<sup>1</sup>, we need balance, level-headedness, compassion, empathy, diligence, and restraint to buffer the sharp edges of our increasingly demanding society.



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<sup>1</sup>graduate 100% students from high school