

by
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Are We a Zero Tolerance District?

Waukesha School District officials are often asked that question by parents, students, and social workers. Nowhere in our board policies or administrative practices does it say the district is a zero tolerance district.

We do have zero tolerance for many things, however. Violence, weapons, cheating, fighting, bullying, harassment, truancy, and swearing are all behaviors that are unacceptable in and around schools. In our district, having zero tolerance means that *there is a consequence* for behavior that is unacceptable, illegal, unkind, or enumerated in our student rights and responsibilities policy or student handbooks.

A January 1999 *Phi Deltan Kappan* article noted that the term “zero tolerance” first appeared in newspapers in 1983, “when the Navy reassigned 40 submarine crew members for suspected drug use. In 1986 zero tolerance was picked up and used by a U.S. attorney in San Diego as the title of a program that was developed to impound seacraft carrying any amount of drugs. By February 1988, the program had received national attention.” Later, the article states that in 1989, some California and Kentucky school districts promulgated zero tolerance policies that called for the expulsion of students for the possession of drugs or participation in gang-related activity.

It has recently been reported that in some schools, elementary students were suspended or expelled for possessing squirt guns, lemon drops (mistaken for drugs), and a kitchen knife that fell out of a box following a parent’s move.

The key question, it seems to me, is should we have automatic consequences for certain behaviors, or should we look at each situation individually and apply the right solution?

School districts must balance pressure and support, rules and its mission, and orderly schools and student rights. If I had to give our approach a name it would be zero tolerance with compassion, common sense, and service.

Here is how it works here. Our school board policy on drugs, use, possession or sale, dealing, and drug paraphernalia requires:

1. Police involvement.
2. Suspension from school.
3. A review by one of the three central office administrators who supervise the school.

The complete known and needed facts are looked at. We also examine the totality of the student’s record and situation: all office referrals, grades and school work, honesty and cooperation of the student, previous offenses, the amount and purpose of any use or possession, and, most importantly, the thinking of the school principal and staff who work with the student and the parents.

Following this review, the student is brought before the school board for an expulsion or, if the facts dictate otherwise, some other serious consequence. Even if an expulsion is handed out by the board, it usually is for the rest of the year or semester, with an opportunity to be reinstated early on a short leash with major conditions including drug screens and often treatment.

Having sat through and presented hundreds of expulsion cases (most for drugs), I believe that rationality in school discipline is the only answer. Certainly many students need expulsions for first offenses. But not all. A student who possesses a clean (never used) pipe that is known to be associated with marijuana use should not get the same automatic consequence as someone caught with six

baggies, \$200 in cash, a pager, a list of users, and a used pipe with residue. Yet, zero tolerance policies in other districts might call for permanent expulsion for both students. Such policies, according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, “are a double-edged sword. They send a loud and clear no-use message, but they can encourage parents who know of drug use by a child and students who know of such use by a classmate to remain silent because of fear of expulsion from school, often allowing the child or classmate to become more dependent on the drug. Moreover, too few schools with such policies work with troubled students to get them into treatment; even fewer offer the hope of return to school to help motivate them to enter and complete treatment.”

It is my hope that this narrative adds common sense to the zero tolerance debate. Our school board has supported us in this approach. The problems our kids face today around drugs and alcohol are huge. Our school districts must continue to be learning organizations around these issues. Our children need us to model rationality with compassion and toughness. ■

Web Sites of Interest

<http://www.kiva.net/~pdkintl/kappan/ks-ki9901.htm> (the *Kappan* article)
<http://www.eagleforum.org/educate/2001/july01/zero-thinking.shtml>
<http://www.writewinger.com/article1034.html>
<http://www.ztnightmares.com>

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