Student’s Name

Professor Green

English 1A

5 April 2015

Zero Tolerance: One Size Does Not Fit All

Is a spitball as dangerous as a bullet? Is a butter knife as hazardous as a loaded pistol? The line between harmful and harmless may seem obvious in these scenarios, but to school lawmakers, they are one in the same. Zero-tolerance policies are prevalent in public schools nationwide, but do they keep students safe or endanger their future?

"Zero tolerance" refers to school policies that punish all offenses of a certain nature (weapon-related, drug-related, etc.) the same way, no matter the severity or situation of the act. Rules such as these disregard mitigating factors and individual circumstances in favor of a more pragmatic, objective approach. If a student were found with a pair of scissors in her pocket, a firework in his locker, or even a butter knife in her car, the incident is treated as seriously and severely as possession a switchblade or pistol would be. Proponents of zero tolerance believe that it is effective at deterring student misconduct and keeping schools safe. They do not take emotional appeal into account when delivering a verdict, be it for better or worse. "Sometimes justice is at its most merciful when it's blind," explains author Nancy Gibbs, who profiled several high school students effected by the harsh legislation.

Sonoma County is not exempt from this growing trend in school policy. The Sonoma County Office of Education's Code of Conduct is stringent and thorough, detailing the offenses that could land a student in hot water. "Gang colors" such as red and blue are not to be worn at school. Electronic devices of any kind are prohibited on campus, as are drugs, alcohol, and the vaguely-described "dangerous objects" outlined in section four ("Code of Student Conduct"). These rules are enforced with the rigidity of zero tolerance, and breaking them could result in a student's expulsion, with suspension a certainty. But where did this staunch approach to student misbehavior come from?

Zero tolerance originated with the passing of the Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994 under the Clinton administration. Under this legislation, students who brought a weapon to school would be suspended for no less than a year, with no exceptions. This inflexible policy inspired others like it which also addressed common parental concerns of the time - i.e. drugs, violence, and sex. Though violent youth offenses steadily began to decline, major news stories of the time made tragedy and crime seem more prevalent than ever among teenagers. This is the climate in which zero tolerance gained its footing. It further burgeoned in the late '90s / early 2000s after the tragic mass shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, which swept America into a climate of fear and mistrust regarding school safety. By 1997, 79 percent of the nation's schools had adopted zero tolerance policies on violence beyond what the government required (Kang-Brown et al. 1-2). The policies have stuck ever since.

Zero tolerance, by design, does not factor in any mitigating circumstances of a given situation. Take, for example, the case of Darnell "Dynasty" Young, an Indianapolis high school student who was chronically bullied by his peers for his sexuality and flamboyant personality. Administrators did nothing but encourage him to "tone down" his mannerisms, and the abuse continued for months. Young was then given a stun gun by his mother for his own protection after being assaulted by a group of classmates, who had thrown rocks at him. The teens bullied him relentlessly, and on one such occasion, Young whipped his stun gun out and switched it on. The threat proved to be enough to send his tormentors running, and they reported the incident to the school. Though Young had not injured anyone, and he was acting in self-defense, he was expelled for possession of a weapon on campus (Laub). His expulsion likely did not make his high school any safer, nor did it punish the bullies that were to blame for the constant harrassment. If zero tolerance is not making school safer for people like Darnell Young, is it truly worth the effort?

The gender disparity of zero tolerance and its subsequent disciplinary action also cannot be overlooked. Males are twice as likely to be punished as female students (Kang-Brown et al. 3), a disproportionately large figure, seeing as there are roughly equal numbers of boys and girls in the American educational system. This variation is too great to be attributed to mere coincidence. And there is yet another statistical anomaly that cannot be written off - the great racial divide between white [and white-passing] students and students of color, generally black and Hispanic. African American students are suspended three times more often than white students, and are three times more likely to drop out of school entirely as a result (NAACP 1). Latino youth are slightly better off than black students, and are only twice as likely as their white counterparts to be suspended or expelled (Kang-Brown et al. 3). It is difficult to ascribe these inconsistencies to anything other than discrimination. The practice of zero tolerance policies is inexorably linked with the unspoken racial bias that is still so prevalent in American society. And by isolating and dividing students that are already marginalized, schools are setting them up for a rough future - maybe one behind bars.

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the manner in which school policy treats young offenders. Student misconduct is punished harshly, without educating students on what they have done and why it is wrong. This leads them to misbehaving again and again, until they have ended up in jail or prison because they did not get a chance learn from their mistakes. Advocates for education reform often reference this concept when criticizing zero tolerance. Russell J. Skiba, a notable advocate for equality and educational reform, notes that zero tolerance has "dramatically increased the number of students put out of school for disciplinary purposes, and may be accelerating student contact with law enforcement" (Skiba 27).

When students are prosecuted and punished in courtrooms rather than classrooms, they get a firsthand look at the criminal justice system for even the most minor of offenses. Getting in trouble once at school can lead to a pattern of run-ins with the law and often ends with repeat offenders being incarcerated. Help and rehabilitation is not offered to those students who desperately need guidance - they are merely thrown into the system without learning from their mistakes. Zero tolerance's love of law enforcement can lead to a lifetime behind bars. Authors William Lyons and Julie Drew examine the correlation between school policy and incarceration in their book *Punishing Schools: Fear and Citizenship in American Public Education*. They contend that zero tolerance is actually enforced by this vicious cycle it generates, by these "amplified images of rising school violence, and a criminal justice system with more inmates per capita than any civilization in the history of time... A zero tolerance political culture sustains and justifies them"(Lyons and Drew 9). This fear-breeding-fear mentality does not serve the students, schools, or law enforcement officers, and is ultimately counterproductive to zero tolerance's goal of keeping students out of trouble. It does keep them off the streets, however, as it puts them behind bars. However, proponents of zero tolerance still sing its praises despite this.

Some may argue that zero tolerance has been a strong deterrent to student crime and should be kept for that very reason. Though the statistics surrounding zero tolerance are hazy at best, studies do seem to show a slight downward trend in youth offenses over the past twenty years, coinciding with the inception of the aforementioned Gun-Free Schools Act. It would be imprudent to discredit the effects of these policies when they do seem to be doing what they were designed to do. Yet this positive trend in school misconduct comes with a heaping pile of side effects, including the countless suspensions, expulsions, and arrests zero tolerance has directly caused. Who knows how many high school students have become lost in the vicious cycle that is the school-to-prison pipeline? When these suspended students are dropping out and being incarcerated at a rate of three times that of their peers (NAACP 1), it is time to make a change. The zero tolerance system is discouraging rehabilitation rather than facilitating it.

The Obama administration has taken a hard stance on the practice in recent months, with Attorney General Eric Holder condemning zero tolerance as "overly zealous," saying: "A routine school disciplinary infraction should land a student in the principal’s office, not in a police precinct" (Hefling). However, this advisory is simply that, and schools do not have to heed the president's warning. Many districts are opting to stay with zero tolerance because they do not know of another effective method of discipline. The responsibility of punishment falls outside the jurisdiction of school administrators, and they are not in a hurry to regain that culpability.

So what are the alternatives to zero tolerance that still offer its benefits? "Self-proclaimed progressive schools deemphasized testing and discipline, replacing those practices with student-driven, hands-on learning; collaboration among schools and families; and social-emotional well-being," reports Carly Berwick, author of "Zeroing Out Zero Tolerance." By treating discipline as a responsibility that requires a level of personal attention, schools like these aim to not only deter student misconduct, but understand and treat the reasons behind the behavior.

Many schools that have eradicated zero tolerance (like the Los Angeles County school district) have instead implemented methods that are more hands-on with educators and more hands-off with the legal system. "Third-graders at Oakland’s Park Day School are writing notes in a confidential book to express worries about conflict in class," writes Berwick, also citing Boston public school Mission Hill, in which an instructor "ties green string between children's pictures of their dreams to help them to visualize connections." Though these practices may seem dubious to some, their effects have yet to be called into question, and results seem to be on par with schools that implement zero tolerance, though with far less suspensions and expulsions. Zero tolerance has not adequately done its job. It has alienated students and prepared them for a life spent fighting the system. And at an age where they should be learning to respect others, all they are learning is to fear authority.

Works Cited

Berwick, Carly. "Zeroing Out Zero Tolerance." *The Atlantic Monthly* 17 Mar. 2015: n. pag.

Web. 30 Mar. 2015.

"Code of Student Conduct." *Sonoma County Office of Education*. SCOE, July 2014. Web. 30

Mar. 2015. <http://www.scoe.org/files/code-of-conduct.pdf>.

"Fed Up With Zero Tolerance In Schools, Advocates Push for Change." Narr. Laura Isensee. *All*

*Things Considered (NPR)*. Hosted by Robert Siegel et al. National Public Radio. 26 Feb.

2014. Transcript. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 30 Mar. 2015.

Gibbs, Nancy. "Zero Tolerance, Zero Sense." *Time* 21 Mar. 2011: 62. *Academic Search*

*Complete*. Web. 30 Mar. 2015.

Hefling, Kimberly. "Obama Administration Urges Schools to Drop ‘Zero-Tolerance’ Discipline

Policies." *Dallas Morning News* [Dallas, TX] 8 Jan. 2014: n. pag. *The Dallas Morning*

*News*. Web. 11 Apr 2015. <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/headlines/20140

108-obama-administration-urges-schools-to-srop-zero-tolerance-discipline-policies.ece>.

Kang-Brown, Jacob, et al. "A Generation Later: What We've Learned about Zero Tolerance in

Schools." *Vera Institute of Justice*: n. pag. *Vera Institute of Justice*. Web. 6 Apr. 2015.

<http://www.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/zero-tolerance-in-schools-

policy-brief.pdf>.

Laub, Carolyn. "Why Zero Tolerance Is Not the Solution to School Bullying." Editorial. *The*

*Huffington Post*. Huffington Post, 16 May 2012. Web. 6 Apr. 2015.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carolyn-laub/bullying-zero-

tolerance\_b\_1521844.html>.

Lyons, William, and Julie Drew. *Punishing Schools: Fear and Citizenship in American Public*

*Education*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 30

Mar. 2015.

*NAACP*. "Discipline Resources." N.d. Digital File.

Skiba, Russell J. "The Failure of Zero Tolerance." *Reclaiming Children & Youth* 22.4 (2014):

27-33. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 30 Mar 2015.