

The Pros and Cons of Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools

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In 1994, federal legislation required states to expel any student who brought a firearm to school for one year. If schools didn't comply, they'd lose all federal funding.

Following that law, many schools adopted zero tolerance policies for students who brought any type of weapon to school. Many of them also developed zero tolerance policies for possession of drugs and alcohol as well as [incidents of bullying](#).

Although the idea stemmed from school officials wanting to keep kids safe, many educators question their effectiveness. In fact, over the years, zero tolerance policies have become quite controversial.

Support for Zero Tolerance Policies

Supporters of zero tolerance say strict policies are necessary to keep the learning environment safe for students. Proponents report it doesn't matter why a particular rule was broken. There should be no exceptions under any circumstances and kids should receive [serious consequences](#) for violating the policies.

Supporters also say zero tolerance policies best prepare children for the real world. After all, the police officer usually doesn't care if you were speeding because you were late for work, you still broke the law.

Similarly, your boss may not care what excuse you have for being late. You might not get paid for the time you missed, regardless of whether you had a flat tire or you got stuck in traffic.

Proponents also say zero tolerance reduces favoritism because there isn't room for subjectivity. Just because a student is smart or has parents who are involved with the school, there won't be any room for leniency when the rules are broken.

Zero Tolerance Policy Criticisms

Critics of zero tolerance policies express concerns that such policies lack "common sense." For example, there is often little agreement about what constitutes a weapon.

A rubber band or nail clippers may be enough to get students suspended. Similarly, a student in possession of ibuprofen may be expelled for drug possession. Critics site a variety of outrageous examples of [zero tolerance policies gone wrong](#).

The biggest issue most critics have about zero tolerance policies is that they don't work. In 2008, the American Psychological Association published a report that concluded, "Zero tolerance has not been shown to improve school climate or school safety."

The task force who conducted the study expressed concern that zero tolerance policies were unnecessarily preventing children from getting a public education and causing many children to face legal charges for relatively minor offenses.

In 2013, the American Academy of Pediatrics also released a statement criticizing zero tolerance policies. The report expressed concern that such policies are harmful to students because students who receive suspensions and expulsions are 10 times more likely to drop out of high school. Students who are sent home may not have an adult to supervise their activities and they may become more likely to engage in illegal activity.

Alternatives to Zero Tolerance Policies

There are many alternatives to zero tolerance policies that can help keep kids in school while also teaching them valuable life lessons.

Of course, violence prevention is one of the best ways to keep everyone in a school system safe. [Restorative justice programs](#) and community service may be [better interventions](#) for first-time offenders. Determining consequences on a case-by-case basis can prevent overly harsh consequences. Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions could then be reserved for repeat offenders who pose a real risk to school systems.

Dealing with a Zero Tolerance Policy

If your child's school has a zero tolerance policy, educate yourself about the rules. Understand what the policy covers and make certain your child understands the policy.

Take a proactive approach to preventing your child from breaking the policy by having aspirin in a pocket or a squirt gun in a backpack. And stay involved with your child's school so you can understand the reasons behind their rules and the best ways to keep your child safe.