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## More schools rethinking zero-tolerance discipline stand

By Donna St. George, Published: June 1

Nearly two decades after a zero-tolerance culture took hold in American schools, a growing number of educators and elected leaders are scaling back discipline policies that led to lengthy suspensions and ousters for such mistakes as carrying toy guns or Advil.

This rethinking has come in North Carolina and Denver, in Baltimore and Los Angeles — part of a phenomenon driven by high suspension rates, community pressure, legal action and research findings. In the Washington region, [Fairfax County](#) is considering policy changes after a wave of community concern; school leaders in the District and Prince George's, Arlington and Montgomery counties have pursued new ideas, too.

The shift is a quiet counterpoint to a long string of high-profile cases about [severe punishments](#) for childhood misjudgments. In recent months, a high school lacrosse player was suspended in Easton, Md., and led away in handcuffs for having a pocketknife in his gear bag that he said was for fixing lacrosse sticks. Earlier, a teenager in the Virginia community of Spotsylvania was expelled for blowing plastic pellets through a tube at classmates.

Now, in many areas, efforts are underway to find a more calibrated approach to school discipline. Educators are increasingly focused on the fallout of suspensions, which are linked to lower academic achievement and students dropping out.

In Delaware, for example, zero-tolerance cases were a repeated issue in the [Christina School District](#), where a 6-year-old with a camping utensil that included a knife was suspended in 2009. Discipline procedures were revamped last year, giving administrators the discretion to consider a student's intent and grade, as well as the risk of harm. Out-of-school suspensions in the state's largest school system fell by one-third in a year.

"It's a more child-centered approach," said Wendy Lapham, a spokeswoman for the Christina schools.

In North Carolina, zero-tolerance also is being ratcheted back in the Wake County School District, the state's largest. "This has been the biggest overhaul of our discipline policies in the last 30 years," said Wake school board member Keith Sutton, who concluded that suspension numbers were so high at two schools that it was like "zero-tolerance gone wild."

### **Taking a tough stand**

Zero-tolerance ideas became part of federal education law under the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which mandates that those who bring firearms to school be expelled. Many states and

school systems jumped in over the years, adopting automatic punishments for drug possession and behavioral offenses. It was a time of abiding concern about school safety, intensified by [the mass shooting at Columbine High School](#) in Colorado in 1999.

More broadly, it was a time of tough attitudes toward criminal sentencing, years when three-strikes laws were popular and political leaders had declared a war on drugs.

Now, “it’s become evident that simply suspending students and putting them on the street comes back and bites you,” said Bob Wise, a former governor of West Virginia and president of the [Alliance for Excellent Education](#).

Views of discipline and behavior also are changing as schools embrace anti-bullying programs and other prevention-oriented approaches.

One widely popular strategy, known as [positive behavior support](#), uses structured methods for teaching behavior, with prompting, practice and intervention. Suspensions still occur, but the goal is to keep problems from happening in the first place. Nationally, 14,000 schools are involved — including schools in the District and in Loudoun, Alexandria, Fairfax, Montgomery, Prince George’s and Prince William counties.

“I think school districts are trying to create a variety of different options so suspension is not the only thing on the list,” said Catherine Bradshaw, associate director of the [Johns Hopkins University Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence](#).

In Indiana, a new law requires school systems to create plans to modernize school discipline, with positive-behavior support and a review of zero-tolerance. In Denver, a multiyear discipline reform effort was sparked by a community group, [Padres & Jovenes Unidos](#) (Parents and Youths United).

In Baltimore, it started with a new superintendent seeking to turn around the school system. Suspensions are now no longer given for attendance violations, and most consequences ratchet up gradually. Out-of-school suspensions were down 38 percent in 2009-2010, compared with three years earlier, said Jonathan Brice, executive director for student support and safety in city schools.

“It’s incumbent on schools to have a wide range of consequences, at the very end of which are suspension and expulsion,” Brice said. “Previously, the mind-set was very focused on suspension as a solution.”

Suspensions do not improve the behavior of students in trouble or their peers, said Dewey Cornell, a University of Virginia education professor who studies school safety. Many people assume that suspensions help students change, he said, “but they don’t.”

The American Psychological Association [reported](#) in a 2008 journal article that research has found no evidence that zero-tolerance policies have a deterrent effect or keep schools safer.

Over the years, “zero-tolerance” has described discipline policies that impose automatic consequences for offenses, regardless of context. The term also has come to refer to severe punishments for relatively minor infractions. Some schools boast of using zero-tolerance; others insist that they do nothing of the sort.

Skeptics of zero-tolerance say much remains to be done. “The tide is in some ways beginning to turn, but we have a very long way to go to see these reforms realized for all districts across the country,” said Matt Cregor of the [NAACP Legal Defense Fund](#).

But even as change is visible, the country remains divided.

“We’re clearly beginning to see changes in thinking and practice,” said Russell Skiba, an Indiana University professor who has written extensively on school discipline.

Still, “there are apparently a lot of places where, when zero-tolerance isn’t working, it’s just applied more and harder,” he said. “So what we see are two different trends happening at once in school discipline: reform and change in some districts, and an increased use of suspension and expulsion in others.”

### **Fairfax’s experience**

Fairfax’s school system reflects the national debate.

The system has come under scrutiny after the January [suicide](#) of a 15-year-old struggling with the fallout of a disciplinary infraction. Another case, the lengthy suspension of a [middle school student who kept acne pills in her locker, also raised concerns](#).

Some parents accuse Fairfax of having a zero-tolerance philosophy, but school officials contend that they do not use zero-tolerance and that they closely follow state laws on drug and weapons offenses. In recent weeks, Superintendent Jack D. Dale has proposed changes in such areas as disciplinary hearings and support services for suspended students.

The school system’s positive behavior support goes back to 2005. Since then, the number of suspendable infractions has fallen 18 percent. Long-term suspensions plummeted 69 percent, according to school system figures.

“There definitely has been a decrease throughout the system,” said Mary Ann Panarelli, director of intervention and prevention services for Fairfax schools. She said every school in the county uses a positive behavior method of some type.

Fairfax also is proposing expanding a pilot program on “restorative justice,” which emphasizes recognizing mistakes and repairing harm. And several years ago, it enlisted researchers from U-Va. to bring in threat-assessment techniques — so that threats of violence are handled according to the danger they pose.

This approach is used in Loudoun schools, also.

“It’s the antidote to zero-tolerance,” said Cornell, lead designer of the program.

### **Shifting techniques**

State statistics show that Northern Virginia school systems — including those in Fairfax, Arlington, Alexandria, Prince William and Loudoun — have seen a notable decline in suspensions during the past five years.

In Arlington, Meg Tuccillo, assistant superintendent for administrative services, said the system has moved away from automatic 10-day suspensions. Students who are suspended spend fewer days out of school, and next year the county will go a step further: with an alternative-to-suspension program for first offenders with substance-abuse infractions. “Being out of school a week is a long time,” Tuccillo said. “You get to 10 school days, and it becomes a new way of life.” Often, parents are at work and teens are alone, passing idle hours. “We’d much rather be working with them,” she said.

In Alexandria, Lawrence Jointer, director of pupil services, said he rejects zero-tolerance policies. “I think we need to look at the individual and the situation,” he said. The school system has brought positive-behavior support to eight schools and has plans to expand to seven more over the next two years, officials said.

In Prince William, which follows positive-behavior support in a third of its schools, expelled students with less-egregious cases may now apply for readmission earlier, said Pamela Brown, chief of student management and alternative programs.

Last year, Prince William had 50 expulsions, down from 105 the year before. “It’s our goal to keep kids in school,” Brown said, “but if you bring a bag of marijuana to school, we are not going to try to keep you in school. We are not going to tolerate that.”

In Loudoun, positive-behavior support has “really changed the way in which we’ve dealt with behavior,” said John Lody, director of diagnostic and prevention services. The approach, now in 45 of 80 schools, “is one of those concepts that is really simplistic and obvious on the surface,” he said, “but almost never practiced in school.”

### **Good, bad changes**

In Prince George’s, Karyn Lynch, chief of student services, has spent much of the past year wrestling with a fundamental issue: How does a school system balance the need for school safety and order with what individual students need once they get in trouble?

Suspensions spiked last year, compared with the year before, prompting a committee to look into the problem. Recommendations will soon go to Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. Meanwhile, suspensions are approached differently — with more emphasis on alternatives, more review of discipline decisions and shorter periods out of school, Lynch said.

In Montgomery, a new approach to suspensions started in 2008. Each case is judged by a set standard, and principals are encouraged to convene administrative teams to discuss consequences, said Frank Stetson, the chief school performance officer.

“We want schools to consider alternative options to suspending students out of school, but we’re not saying you can’t suspend,” Stetson said. “What we’re trying to do is open up the thinking on it and consider the teaching and learning issues.”

Montgomery still has zero-tolerance for such offenses as carrying weapons or distributing drugs, he said. But discipline changes have contributed to a 45 percent decline in suspensions since 2007, as well as a major reduction in racial disparities related to which students get punished.

In the District, where suspension rates have been high in many schools, a working group started an effort in 2007 to move toward a more progressive approach.

Chad Ferguson, deputy chief of youth engagement for city schools, said officials are now promoting alternatives to suspension: verbal reprimands, parent conferences, behavior contracts, after-school sessions.

The goal, he said, is to teach behavior, conveying expectations and instructing those who fall short, in much the same way educators treat academic instruction.

Still, Ferguson said, throughout the city there are too many suspensions. “This is definitely taking time to turn around a culture,” he said.

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