



FACT SHEET

Zero tolerance

What is Zero Tolerance?

Zero tolerance is a policy that specifies a harsh punishment for an offense, *regardless of the circumstances*. Zero tolerance policies were adopted around the country in 1994 under the federal Gun-Free Schools Act. The law, a response to several school shootings, mandated expulsion for any student who brought a gun onto school grounds.

Today, however, zero tolerance has been significantly extended and is used in many schools to apply to a very broad range of behaviors that are not dangerous. That can result in suspension, expulsion or even arrest.

Unintended consequences

Zero tolerance policies have been used against elementary schools students with pocket camping utensils that are deemed knives and students with parent-approved cold medications that are deemed drugs.

When educators can't use their own judgment, kids get expelled or arrested for offenses that simply don't warrant that kind of response (or sometimes for offenses that don't warrant any response at all).

Harsher on some kids than others

Generally only public schools have zero tolerance policies, because of requirements schools must meet to get state or federal funding. Some districts have especially severe policies. So where you go to school – rather than what you've actually done – may determine how severe your punishment is.

Squeezing out parents

A generation ago, students cringed when their parents got a call from school. It meant absolute accountability because all the adults in a child's life would be working together to address problem behavior. Under zero tolerance, parents aren't consulted – they're notified. Because the penalties are so often unduly harsh, parents end up advocating for their kids and being at odds with school administrators and police.

What Can I Do About It?

Look into the Student Code of Conduct or Discipline Policy in your district to determine how broadly zero tolerance is being applied.

Try to discuss this issue with your board of education or superintendent

Write a letter to the editor of your local paper.

See the website (ctjja.org/forum) or *The Essentials* for more information.