



## **Micro-Workshop 4**

### ***Zero Tolerance Policies: Do They Teach Better Ways to Behave?***

School boards have responded to the perception that violence in school is increasing or is out of control by adopting a “get tough” approach referred to as “zero tolerance.” The policy usually applies to possession of weapons, drugs and alcohol, but it can include vandalism, fighting, swearing and other disruptive behaviours. While zero tolerance policies may appear to be a reasoned response to violence, the concept needs to be carefully examined to consider some key issues: what students learn when any misbehaviour is punished without due process, how serious is school violence and how effective are zero tolerance policies in making schools (and communities) safer.

This session will provide some food for thought as your staff discusses the implications of adopting zero tolerance measures. You will have a chance to question the assumptions that underlie the policy, examine research that focuses on the effectiveness of zero tolerance and decide whether or not this policy is appropriate and consistent with your own school’s values, beliefs and mission. It is useful to examine the implications of zero tolerance prior to formulating or modifying the school’s Code of Conduct.

Prior to looking at the policy, ask participants to answer the following questions individually:

- \*\* What do you understand by the term *zero tolerance*?
- \*\* Why have zero tolerance approaches to violence been a popular response to the perception that school violence has increased in recent years? List the reasons.
- \*\* What might a zero tolerance policy teach students?

### ***Discussion***

Lead the group in a discussion of these questions. Provide the information included in each of the following responses during the debriefing. Share answers to question 1 with the whole group. Come back to 2 and 3 later. The group facilitator may write key phrases reflecting participant answers on flip chart paper at the front of the room or participant responses can be shared informally in smaller groups.

### **Response to question 1**

#### **What do you understand by the term *zero tolerance*?**

There will be some variation (and perhaps some controversy) in the answer to question 1 because the term *zero tolerance* has been used in different contexts and the meaning has been modified. For the purpose of this micro-workshop we will use the definition used by Alberta

Learning as stated in *Supporting Safe, Secure and Caring Schools in Alberta*, 1999. Write this definition on a poster or create an overhead of the definition.

*Zero tolerance refers to those policies that treat minor and major incidents of violence with equal severity in order to send a strong message to potential violators.*

Point out that some people may understand zero tolerance to mean that all inappropriate behaviours are dealt with individually and not all problems should have the same consequences. However, this is not the usual intent of such a policy. For the purpose of this session we will discuss zero tolerance using Alberta Learning's definition. Zero tolerance essentially means that one consequence fits all.

It is important to understand the origins of zero tolerance policies. The term zero tolerance – referring to policies that punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor – grew out of American state and federal drug enforcement policies in the 1980s (Skiba and Peterson, 1999). The first application of the policy occurred in a military context. In 1983, the US Navy reassigned 40 submarine crew members suspected of drug abuse. Later the policy was picked up by an attorney and used as the title of a program to impound sea craft suspected of carrying drugs, even minute amounts. By 1988, the US Attorney General authorized customs officials to seize the boats, automobiles and passports with even trace amounts of drugs. Zero tolerance has been quietly discontinued because considerable controversy threatened to result in lawsuits against the program.

Zero tolerance has since been applied to issues as diverse as environmental pollution, trespassing, skateboarding, racial intolerance, homelessness, sexual harassment and boom boxes. In the US, zero tolerance policies found their way into school policy just as they were being phased out of other areas. In many cases the policy was broadened to include not just drug-related incidents, but possession of weapons, gang-related activities, school disruptions and even bans on hats. In some cases, law enforcement agencies were used to implement the policy in schools. The most common consequence for violations was exclusion from school, usually suspensions or expulsions.

### **Response to question 2.**

#### **Why have zero tolerance policies been a popular response to perceptions of increased violence?**

Share the group's answers to question 2. You may want to provide this list of possible responses and show these after the sharing. Add to the list if new ideas emerge in discussion.

Many will probably say that zero tolerance:

- \*\* is a simple concept that sounds tough and gives the impression of high standards of behaviour;
- \*\* is believed to be an effective way to improve school safety by ensuring that all children, regardless of race, ability or parental influences, follow the rules;

- \*\* is seen as an appropriate response to random violence and to truly dangerous behaviours that are highlighted in the news;
- \*\* provides a “fix-it” approach to problems that have been ignored or not dealt with in “concrete” ways. It says “we’re doing something;”
- \*\* is thought to be the fairest approach because all offenders are treated with equal severity; and
- \*\* gives authorities an opportunity to reassert their power and to be seen as taking charge.

Take a few minutes to ponder these reasons and any additional ones your group may have suggested. Prompt your group to think about the genuine concerns that people have about school violence. Ask:

- \*\* Which of these reasons seem most justified in implementing zero tolerance policies?
- \*\* Which reasons may not be justified?
- \*\* Is zero tolerance an appropriate response to these concerns?

### **What are the underlying assumptions upon which zero tolerance policies are based?**

While most of these reasons seem to be legitimate, even logical, it is important to consider the underlying assumptions upon which these are founded. Can we assume that zero tolerance policies

- \*\* improve student behaviour,
- \*\* make a school safer,
- \*\* generate greater respect and foster student responsibility,
- \*\* are fair,
- \*\* are straightforward and easy to implement, and
- \*\* respect the dignity of students?

Come back to these assumptions at the end of the workshop and continue to question their validity. The following reflection activity may help.

### *Optional Activity*

Think about a time when your own response to student misbehaviour resulted in your imposing a rule with one very specific consequence. If you have never done this, think of what might happen if you did. You may have said, “The next time x happens, y will be the consequence and that’s final.” Try to remember what happened when you laid down the law in such a fashion. How did the class react? What were some of the problems, if any, you had in implementing the consequence? Did this lead to better behaviour? What did the students learn? Share your experience with a partner.

There will be a variety of responses, some positive and some negative. Some of the responses might be:

- \*\* A normally cooperative student broke the rule, and I was forced to make an example of him/her.

- \*\* Students were happy to see me taking charge.
- \*\* Extenuating circumstances made the application of the consequence seem unfair or inappropriate.
- \*\* The punished student became more resentful and his or her behaviour got worse
- \*\* Students saw me as being fairer.
- \*\* I felt backed into a corner and was limited in my ability to be flexible.
- \*\* I nailed an innocent student.
- \*\* The class offender improved.

Point out that establishing rules and consequences is not a bad thing. In fact, it is necessary to maintain order in the class and in society. Try to think about the way rules are applied and some of the subsequent problems that can result when discretion in treating students as individuals and with flexibility is removed.

What assumptions did you make as a teacher when you implemented a rule with a hard and fast single consequence that covered minor and major offenses with the same severity?

Our goal should be to have students choose to behave well and choose to be non-violent when an authority figure is not present. We want students to believe that hurting someone is wrong. A one-consequence punishment teaches students that they will get into trouble if they are caught hurting someone. Zero tolerance sends the message that we won't tolerate them if they break rules, and we won't listen to them either.

### **Is school violence on the increase?**

Public perception is that school violence is on the rise. Fears have surfaced in the light of news stories that detail school shootings and other horrific events. These stories lend credence to the belief that drugs, violence and general disrespect for authority are spreading. In fact, since the early 1990s, according to Irwin Hyman (1998) school violence in the United States has remained relatively unchanged for both minor and major infractions. Actual evidence contradicts gut feelings. According to researchers, what people really fear is random violence and the belief that it could happen to their child.

When zero tolerance policies are adopted near epidemic suspensions and expulsions for seemingly trivial offenses increase dramatically. This reinforces the perception that things are getting worse. There are numerous documented examples (Skiba and Peterson, 1999) where the application of zero tolerance has been inappropriate, highly questionable and has resulted in more problems. For example, in Sayerville, New Jersey, four Kindergarten students were suspended for three days for playing cops and robbers and making threats. The children were using their fingers as guns (*Edmonton Journal*, April, 2000). What might these Kindergarten students have learned from their suspension?

### **What are the problems with zero tolerance policies?**

Zero tolerance policies based on the belief that suspending or expelling offenders will create a safer school are suspect. There have been few studies that compare schools that have

implemented zero tolerance to misbehaviour with schools that haven't. According to Skiba and Peterson (1999, 8) the schools that use zero tolerance policies are still less safe than those without such policies. They go on to say that some data suggests that certain strategies, such as strip searches and undercover agents in school may, in fact, create emotional harm or encourage some students to drop out.

The assumption that zero tolerance will change misbehaviour by sending harsh warnings and deterring others also needs to be examined. In Halifax, students protested zero tolerance at their school when junior high students were suspended for pushing each other and playing in the snow. The controversial policy had seen more than 100 suspensions during the year, and students feel that their school is oppressive, even prison-like (*Edmonton Journal*, Feb, 2000). Unfortunately, policies that indiscriminately set harsh consequences capture a few incidents of serious violence and many incidents of minor violence that could be dealt with using low-level responses.

When students are suspended frequently (usually the most at-risk students), the likelihood that they will drop out of school altogether increases (Morrison D'Incau, 97). The very students who require education the most are excluded through zero tolerance responses to their behaviour. One student interviewed while in detention expressed his thoughts on school suspensions.

*When they suspend you, you get in more trouble, 'cause you're out in the street . . . And that's what happened to me once. I got into trouble one day 'cause there was a party, and they arrested everybody in that party . . . I got in trouble more than I get in trouble at school, because I got arrested and everything. (Thorson, 1996)*

For some educators there is a temptation to increase the list of infractions covered under zero tolerance, making the policy appear to be tough and responsive. Rather than deal with student misbehaviour, schools can wash their hands of problems by suspending and expelling "troublemakers." Ironically, these short-term solutions result in societal problems because those who have been excluded from education are more inclined to turn to crime. What can result are joyless schools, unsafe streets and greater expenditures on detention.

### **Response to question 3**

#### **What do students learn in zero tolerance schools?**

Ask participants to share their answers to question 3. Some responses you may get are that

- \*\* students learn to "play the game,"
- \*\* adults have authority to impose their will and exercise authority,
- \*\* students either have to conform or drop out,
- \*\* meeting individual needs is unimportant,
- \*\* responsibility means conformity, and
- \*\* tolerance for special needs and circumstances is not important or desirable.
- \*\* others

Research indicates that zero tolerance policies are likely to have negative effects on individual students, (especially those at-risk), overall school climate and may, in fact, worsen problems.

Problems resulting from this policy are as follows:

- \*\* Students who commit minor infractions are punished too harshly. This may lead to alienation from school and contribute to underachievement.
- \*\* Heavy reliance on punishment minimizes the opportunities for students to learn how to problem solve and make restitution for their mistakes.
- \*\* At-risk students are more likely to be excluded, leading to further failure in school and increasing the chances of future criminal involvement.
- \*\* Some administrators and teachers use the zero tolerance policies to push out disruptive or misbehaving students, a short-term solution with long-term negative impact.
- \*\* There is no clear evidence that the policy changes behaviour, often it is used to placate other adults and reassert power of authority.
- \*\* Implicitly teaches students that the preservation of order demands the suspension of individual rights and liberties; it models authoritarian rather than democratic values.

### *What are the alternatives to zero tolerance policies?*

While preservation of order demands that boundaries be set and enforced, effective responses to violence require a wide spectrum of approaches that focus on improving students' opportunities to live peacefully in and out of school, now and in the future. These approaches can be effectively established by

- \*\* using problem-solving approaches;
- \*\* developing flexible discipline plans with input from teachers, parents and students;
- \*\* forming school-safety behaviour support teams to ensure consistent and individualized responses to disruptive students;
- \*\* training educators to screen for troubled youth to discern warning signs of potential violence;
- \*\* teaching disruptive students alternatives to aggression through anger management and conflict resolution; and
- \*\* teaching mediation skills.

Curwin and Mendler (1999) advocate a solution called "as tough as necessary," an approach that finds the balance between being strong and being fair. Sometimes this means sanctions that are stronger than zero tolerance. "We need to send messages that violence is not acceptable, yet at the same time, not resort to formulas that don't meet needs of troubled students." Suspensions and expulsions need to be replaced by alternative schooling options until students can be reintegrated into regular programs. Tough as necessary policies need to be based on shared school and community values related to safety for all. Once these are identified, guidelines and consequences need to be established. Consequences must take into account the wide range of circumstances that come into play when students misbehave. Examples of such consequences might be counselling, restitution, behavioural planning, behaviour rehearsal, suspension with training or educational experience or even police involvement.

Comprehensive violence prevention can be incorporated into school and community life, integrated into the curriculum and modeled by adults who show they care about kids. It is most important that these strategies be given to those students whose behaviour challenges us the most.

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## Consider these questions

1. What do you understand by the term *zero tolerance*?
2. Why has zero tolerance to violence been a popular response to the perception that school violence has increased in recent years? List the reasons.
3. What does a zero tolerance policy teach students?

## Zero Tolerance Definition

*Zero tolerance refers to those policies that treat minor and major incidents of violence with equal severity in order to send a strong message to potential violators.*

*Supporting Safe, Secure and Caring Schools in Alberta,*  
Alberta Learning. Special Education Branch, Edmonton, AB, 1999.