

Positive School Discipline and the Supports Educators Need

The AFT has long championed the idea that all schools should be safe and welcoming places. Teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn unless they feel physically secure and emotionally connected. But the sad reality is that too many students—particularly students of color; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth; students with disabilities; and students belonging to ethnic and religious minorities—enter school every day feeling neither welcome nor safe.

This special issue of *American Educator* explores new research on the ways that members of the school community can work together to ensure that schools are safe and welcoming for everyone. It comes nearly two decades after the AFT first supported the introduction of zero-tolerance policies, believing them to be a way to make schools safer and punishments less arbitrary and unfair. The jury is now in, and, far from helping, we now know that zero-tolerance policies have served to make schools less safe and punishments more biased and unfair, especially in their application to students who are different or vulnerable.

According to 2014 civil rights data from the U.S. Education Department, for example, African American students represented only 15 percent of all students but represented 35 percent of students who had been suspended at least once, 44 percent of those suspended more than once, and 36 percent of expelled students. Similarly, students who receive special education services (i.e., those who qualify for services mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) represented only 12 percent of all students but represented 20 percent of students receiving one out-of-school suspension, 25 percent of students receiving multiple out-of-school suspensions, 19 percent of expelled students, and 23 percent of students receiving a school-related arrest. In response to such data, the U.S. departments of Education

and Justice issued federal guidance in January 2014, bringing the force of law to bear upon calls for the elimination of student discipline disparities.

The following pages are devoted to helping all of us move forward. To that end, they address the specifics of what does—and does not—work when it comes to school climate and student discipline. Articles include the research behind effective discipline strategies and the challenges local unions and school districts face in implementing them, as well as educators' personal stories. Other articles explain the role that philanthropy can play in school discipline reform and how implicit biases can inadvertently perpetuate overly punitive discipline measures for students of color. Just as important, this issue offers resources for implementing positive school discipline strategies as well as related resources for addressing students' social and emotional learning, improving relationships within schools, and ensuring that schools are safe and comfortable places to teach and to learn.

According to the researchers and educators who contributed to this issue, one of the main lessons they've learned is that we need to focus less on punishing misbehavior and more on preventing it and helping students learn from what they did wrong.

The move from zero tolerance to supportive discipline practices will not happen overnight. It will take time and a great deal of work and reflection. It will also take educators receiving the proper train-

ing in student engagement, effective behavior management, and restorative practices. It will require the rethinking of school policies, procedures, and routines. It will require all schools—particularly high-poverty schools with the greatest need—to have full access to the community supports, social services, guidance counselors, and health and psychological services that students require. And, as with any educational endeavor, teachers and other school staff, along with parents and students, must be consulted and involved every step of the way for these changes to take hold and succeed.

At the heart of this paradigm shift in school discipline lies a lesson that the best educators continually strive to teach: one can make mistakes, learn from them, and emerge stronger and wiser. It is a lesson that is as true for ourselves and our students as it is for the schools in which we teach.

—EDITORS

