



Moving Past Punishment Toward Support

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EDUCATORS ASPIRE to help all kids grow to meet their full potential.

Each morning, when we walk into our classrooms, we aim to create safe, nurturing environments where each student can thrive and succeed. Educators' efforts must be supported by school leaders and sound policies. But it is increasingly clear that some policies intended to maintain safety and order not only have failed to do so but have caused considerable harm.

That is why many people have called for reevaluating so-called zero-tolerance policies. These policies were promoted by people, including me, who had hoped they would standardize discipline procedures and free students from the disruptions of misbehaving peers; it was analogous to the broken windows theory of policing. We were wrong. Data have shown both that these policies have failed to make schools safer and that their discriminatory application violates the 1964 Civil Rights Act. And they have emphasized punishment, rather than developing the positive behaviors students need in school and in life.

The facts are stark: over the past two decades, zero-tolerance policies have disproportionately affected students of color—particularly African American and Latino boys—as well as students with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. This trend can be seen as early as preschool. One study found that African American children make up 18 percent of enrollment in public preschool, but they account for 42 percent of out-of-school suspensions and 48 percent of multiple suspensions.

As a former New York City public school teacher and someone in constant contact with students, their families, and educators, I know there are cases when suspension or expulsion for serious student misbehavior is warranted and necessary. And I am just as certain that less serious (and more common) incidents should be dealt with using appropriate, proportionate strategies.

These strategies include:

- Professional development for school leaders, educators, and other school staff, including school resource and police officers, on classroom management, child psychology, cultural competency, and conflict resolution;
- Restorative practices through which students assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions;
- Social and emotional learning that is

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integrated into the curriculum so that students develop interpersonal skills to handle frustration and conflict;

- High-quality alternative educational settings for students who violate codes of conduct and need to be removed from the classroom while still maintaining access to instruction; and
- Social, health, and psychological services to address students' needs. It's rare for a student to demonstrate serious misbehavior without first exhibiting signs of needing help. Providing such services can prevent problems, as opposed to simply punishing students after those problems occur.

Such strategies should be applied in all public schools—both district and charter. Shocking revelations about some charter schools suspending or expelling students as young as kindergartners, often for minor infractions, are a reminder that publicly funded charter schools have a legal (and, I would add, moral) obligation to educate the students they have, not just the students they want to have.

All this requires training, support, and resources. We cannot, and will not, support a shift in policies that leaves educators without what they need to manage schools and classrooms effectively.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second-largest school district, has led the way in banning suspensions for defiance and in using restorative justice methods as a way to resolve conflicts. But this shift in policies has not been backed up by the necessary training and supports.

For example, so far only 307 of the district's 900 campuses have received any training under the district's five-year

restorative justice plan, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. In 2014, the district budgeted funds for five restorative justice counselors. And, even though that number was eventually increased to 45, the *Los Angeles Times* estimates that this still represents less than a third of those needed in the district's 181 secondary schools.

By contrast, when sound student behavior policies are combined with adequate resources—as we have seen in Austin, Texas; Cleveland; and New York City, for example—there has been progress. The work by Turnaround for Children, which combines extensive professional development for school administrators and staff, coordination of social and mental health services, and an awareness of the toxic stress and early trauma that can plague high-poverty neighborhoods, has led to transformative change in 80 schools across New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Newark, N.J. This is work we need to emulate. This is change we need to scale up and sustain.

The discipline policies of the past that emphasize punishment over developing positive behaviors are not working. As well-meaning as they were, they have made our schools more inequitable. We now have the chance to learn from these mistakes. We can, and we must, do better for all our kids.