



## The End of Zero Tolerance: From Punishment to Positive Supports

New discipline rules, effective July 1, 2019, will end more than two decades of “zero tolerance” school discipline policies in Washington public schools. Zero tolerance discipline was intended to deter and address student behavior problems with sanctions that were swift, pre-determined and, often, harsh. In place of fixed punishments, the new discipline rules, state: “Before administering any suspension or expulsion, a school district must consider the student’s individual circumstances and the nature and circumstances of the behavioral violation to determine whether the suspension or expulsion, and the length of the exclusion, is warranted.” [WAC 392-400-430\(3\)](#)

The new rules apply to both written policies and unwritten practices.

This change is long overdue. Education systems inherited zero tolerance policies from discredited criminal justice theories, such as the “broken windows” theory of policing, which sought to swiftly and severely punish even the most minor violations as a way of discouraging offenders from committing more severe violations in the future. Zero tolerance is also part of the legacy of the “[juvenile super-predator](#)” theory, which predicted a new generation of violent youth that never materialized. The professors who invented this [theory](#) have since retracted and repudiated it, but its legacy has lived on.

In our schools, zero tolerance has been a [remarkable failure](#). It has been [ineffective](#) at improving student behavior. And this punitive approach has [harmed](#) students who lose academically and become disengaged when removed from the learning environment. Ironically, a system that was intended to be more objective and consistently harsh has instead magnified stark disparities in discipline, with punishments falling much more heavily on students of color, students with disabilities and students from low-income families, in particular.

We now know better. Educators across our state and across the country are increasingly using [effective practices](#) to teach and support positive behavior. Functional approaches, tiered systems of support, restorative practices, social/emotional learning, and others, have each shown greater effectiveness in reducing problem behaviors. When applied consistently, they also help to reduce the discipline disparities that have resulted from past practices. Stay tuned for more discussion about approaches that work in our upcoming newsletters.

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