

TALAHASSEE DEMOCRACY
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HEADLINE: Children Need More Than Zero Tolerance

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School discipline throughout the country can be summed up in two words: "zero tolerance." Zero tolerance school discipline policies, intended to send a strong message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated by punishing all offenses severely, are causing mass exclusion of youth from school. School officials, under public pressure to do something about a perceived threat of violence in schools, apply zero tolerance as an expedient response to student misbehavior or, in many cases, typical student behavior unreasonably construed as dangerous. Florida schools have been among the worst abusers of "zero tolerance" school discipline.

Under current Florida law, school administrators are required to refer students to law enforcement for both serious offenses and many others that are relatively minor. As a result, huge numbers of young people are entering the juvenile and criminal justice systems through the school system for misconduct that should be addressed through other means. For example, Florida schools made 22,926 delinquency referrals in 2006-2007, and two-thirds of them were for misdemeanor offenses.

The state "zero tolerance" law has also trickled down into local school district policy, leading to excessive use of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and arrests throughout the state, and an increase in the role of law enforcement in school disciplinary matters. These policies harm all children, but especially Black students, who are more than twice as likely as their White peers to be suspended or arrested in Florida. The overall effect has been the creation of a "schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track," in which Florida schools are literally pushing thousands of young people out of school and criminalizing them for the same sorts of behavior that traditionally resulted in a trip to the principal's office or a call home. Essentially, the penalties for normal adolescent behavior have been ratcheted up so much that Florida schools are literally setting students up for failure rather than graduation.

Research suggests that these policies are one of the primary causes behind the statewide graduation rate of only 61%, and the disparate impact these policies have on students of color leads directly to the abysmal 47% graduation rate for Black students.

Reversing this trend presents a challenge, but the state legislature seems poised to meet this challenge and is now considering several bills that would limit the use of this highly destructive policy.

The "zero tolerance" statute should be revised to allow the arrest of students for only serious felonies that place others at risk. Legislators should also increase or divert funding for prevention and intervention strategies, which unlike "zero tolerance," have been proven effective at promoting academic achievement, addressing disruptive behavior, and creating a safe school environment. And Florida should explore additional ways to encourage school districts to keep students in school, such as holding them accountable for not just test scores, but improving graduation rates,

reducing the use of suspension, expulsions, and school-based arrests, and reducing racial disparities within all of those categories.

The sad truth is that Florida's "zero tolerance" policies have effectively turned many schools and districts into feeder systems for prisons. This was recently acknowledged by the bi-partisan Florida Blueprint Commission on Juvenile Justice when it issued a report calling for a change in the law and dramatic reductions in the referrals of students to law enforcement. The Blueprint Commission follows the recent trend of districts turning away from "zero tolerance" in favor of more productive approaches.

We urge the Florida legislature to change the culture of discipline in its schools to one that promotes academic achievement, rather than detracts from it. Let's return to the philosophy of treating misbehavior as a teachable moment, rather than as a chance to punish.

Nweze is the President of the Florida State Conference NAACP. She is also a member of the National Board of Directors and Board of Trustees of the NAACP, the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization, which works to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of minority groups and citizens. Browne-Dianis is the Co-Director of Advancement Project, a national civil rights organization that advances universal opportunity, equity and access for those left behind in America.