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# Why Zero Tolerance Is Not the Solution to School Bullying

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Last month an Indianapolis teenager named Darnell "Dynasty" Young brought a stun gun to his high school and fired it into the air.

On Tuesday Young was expelled. Problem solved. He got what he deserved, right?

Nope. In fact, problem aggravated, and not just because Young, an openly gay student, had used the weapon in self-defense after being surrounded by bullies who had harassed him for months, taunting him with slurs and sometimes throwing rocks. He and mom had gone to the principal more than 10 times, but the principal just told Young that he should "tone down" his flamboyant style. Finally, Young's mom gave him the stun gun to fire in the air if he was attacked.

Young's case is simply the latest, if also one of the most outrageous, examples of "zero tolerance" gone wrong. The product of an irrational response to a handful of exceptional incidents, it's a rigid approach to discipline that research shows usually makes matters worse, both for students who bully and for students who are bullied.

In response to the national coverage of the harassment and deaths of several lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth over the past two years, many legislators and school-safety advocates have demanded "zero tolerance" for bullies. But as founder of Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a national organization that empowers students to create safer schools for LGBT youth, I can tell you there's a better way.

Alternative approaches to discipline, including strategies like restorative justice, are slowly but effectively replacing zero-tolerance policies in some of America's most enlightened schools.

These alternatives help prevent bullying and, when bullying does occur, allow school staff to intervene with counseling or other meaningful solutions that help the students engaged in bullying learn from -- and change -- their behavior. By helping keep young people in school, these alternatives not only help students but also improve school and community cultures.

This smart approach has yet to become mainstream, however. Over the past 20 years, out-of-school suspensions nearly doubled in this country. New numbers released by the Department of Education show that expulsion has rapidly increased among students of color, with African-American students accounting for nearly four in 10 expulsions. And the frequent use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion has a high cost. In addition to negative mental health impacts detailed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, students who are expelled are more likely to get caught up in the juvenile justice system. One study found that 80 percent of youth incarcerated in a state facility had been suspended, and that 50 percent had been expelled from school prior to incarceration.

Unaddressed bullying leads students down that same dangerous road. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's 2009 National School Climate Survey found that students who were bullied were three times more likely to carry a weapon to school. For Young, an alternative like restorative justice would have defused the situation long before he felt desperate enough to come to school armed. When Denver Public Schools, for example, rewrote their discipline policy in 2008 to emphasize restorative interventions, they soon saw a 63-percent reduction in number of referrals to law enforcement.

Expelling Young has not made Arsenal Tech High School safer. Neither would simply turning the punishment around by suspending or expelling the students who bullied Young. Studies show that zero-tolerance policies and punitive discipline have failed to improve school climate. Instead, they allow a school's culture of intimidation and violence to go unaddressed while individual students are pushed out without learning from their behavior. Discouragingly, those suspended or expelled students tend to be the ones suffering most from their unsafe school climate in the first place. Punitive discipline actively harms and disproportionately impacts LGBT youth and low-income students of color. According to the Dignity in Schools Campaign, which hosts a database of research on school discipline, LGBT students are 1.4 times more likely to be expelled than their straight peers.

Simple punishment does not address the core issues: the prejudices that students and school staff hold, and their tolerance for a certain level of daily psychological and often physical violence. Just as we need context to understand and address Young's case, we need context to understand why students bully other students and how we can change that behavior. A young person who yells homophobic slurs at his peers learns nothing from a three-day suspension, and the school staff who suspend him learn nothing about that student and any personal issues that might have spurred his behavior.

I believe that schools need to start resolving problems and stop removing students. That's why Gay-Straight Alliance Network has helped run "action camps" on discipline for youth across the country, and why we devoted our annual advocacy day in California to two bills that would reduce the state's suspension and expulsion rates.

I hope others will join GSA Network in pursuing discipline alternatives that do not, ultimately, force students like Young out of school. The national safe-schools movement has an opportunity to strive for schools that, rather than expand the existing environment of fear and punishment, foster a climate of inclusion, safety, and respect for all students. That's what Young, and all our students, deserve.
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