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Bullying + Zero Tolerance ? Safe Schools

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Ray Ferronato and Shaquille Carbon

Ray Ferronato is a Gay-Straight Alliance Network youth leader and senior at Antioch High School in Antioch, California. Shaquille Carbon is a recent graduate from Northwestern High School in Northwest Baltimore, and is an active leader in the Baltimore Algebra Project and the Alliance for Educational Justice.

When we heard about Jamey Rodemeyer and other youth who had taken their own lives after years of being bullied for their sexual orientation and gender identity, we got angry. Maybe angrier than we had ever been. It would have been easy to want to punish and get revenge on all students who bully others. But it would have been wrong.

Yet, that's exactly what's happening across the country. According to Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right: Why Zero Tolerance is Not the Solution to Bullying, by Advancement Project, the Alliance for Educational Justice, and Gay-Straight Alliance Network, there's a national trend to respond to bullying by calling in the police or using other harsh discipline that excludes students from school. For example, fifteen states have passed laws that make bullying a crime. In a lot of school districts, law enforcement gets involved in even the most minor incidents of bullying.

As high school students, we're way too familiar with bullying and the devastating effects it can have on youth, especially lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students. We have seen and experienced the physical, emotional, and psychological damage it can cause, and we passionately advocate against homophobia, transphobia, and bullying.

But we've also seen and experienced the harmful effects that the zero-tolerance approach to discipline can have on students, families, and communities. It led to one of us, Shaquille, being suspended from school just for defending himself from anti-gay harassment -- while his aggressors received a lesser punishment with no follow-up, mediation, or education about why

their actions were wrong. For Ray, who bullied an openly gay student when first coming to terms with his own sexual orientation in middle school, zero tolerance might have stopped him from growing into the out and proud Gay-Straight Alliance activist he is today.

Our experience has very clearly shown that zero tolerance is not a solution to bullying. It is a form of bullying. Across the country, it has led to huge numbers of our peers getting pushed out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems, often for minor offenses. Just like bullying, zero tolerance can traumatize its victims, create unhealthy school climates, hurt academics, and harm the very students -- like us -- that it is supposed to protect. It can turn schools into hostile environments where every student's well-being is threatened.

Zero tolerance hasn't made schools safer because it doesn't teach aggressors why their behavior is harmful and how they can improve it. "Bullies" are, of course, youth just like us, and face their own challenges: ranging from the various insecurities that all young people have to the messages of intolerance, hostility, and hate that we hear at home, at school, and from the media. For example, in Ray's case, he was overwhelmed by questions he had about his own sexuality, and felt that bullying the only openly gay kid was the only way to get some answers. Harsh punishment for bullying cannot fix deep issues like that. But it will worsen the School-to-Prison Pipeline, and move us further away from the safe learning environments that all young people deserve.

Every student has a right to an education. That right isn't only for those young people who somehow manage to go their entire academic career with perfect behavior. And it isn't only for students who are able to avoid conflicts with their peers. It's the right of every one of us, and it should be protected. Part of that means giving us ample opportunities to grow and learn from our mistakes.

We want schools where we have a chance to succeed, and we feel safe, supported, and protected from violence, bullying, and mistreatment, whether it is caused by other students or the adults in our schools. For too long, it has been acceptable to treat us as disposable and to use zero tolerance to put us on a pathway to incarceration. It would be a shame if the deserved concern over bullying created another way to push vulnerable students out of school.

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GSA Network 1550 Bryant St., Suite 600, San Francisco, CA 94103 | 415-552-4229 | info@gsanetwork.org
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