ZERO ROOM FOR ZERO TOLERANCE:
Promoting peer education in local schools

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Executive Summary

Zero tolerance is a practice that is being used in the state of Tennessee, and it is causing more problems among the students then it is helping them. Students who are suspended tend to be more likely to be suspended again or experience expulsion (Boccanfusco, Kuhfeld 2011). When these students are expelled the majority end up appearing in juvenile court and eventually are entered into state custody, which is costing the state of Tennessee approximately $51,837 a year per student (Gursky 2006). An increase in the number of students being expelled from school for minor offenses directly correlates to increases in juvenile court and state custody appearances.

Various alternatives and modes of prevention counter the necessity for school systems to participate in a zero tolerance policy. **We are proposing that third grade students are introduced to a program, which will be known as peer education.** This program will educate children on how to avoid violence during confrontational situations. The program will encourage students to air grievances between students. Teaching peer education as a life skill **has been shown** to decrease the amount of students who are being suspended or expelled (Sumner, Silverman & Frampton). This results in a reduction of students entering state custody, which ultimately saves the state money (Gursky 2006).
Problem Statement

Educational systems implementation of zero tolerance policy puts students at a societal disadvantage. Zero tolerance policies do not differentiate between violent and non-violent offenses. A common issue with zero tolerance policy is it results in the expulsion or suspension for common offenses such as student disobedience. In Los Angeles, non-violent offenses accounted for almost half of the 710,000 suspensions between 2011-2012 (Wantanbe 2013). An unintended consequence of suspension is that unsupervised children are more likely to interact with other young, unsupervised delinquents, creating opportunities for further misbehavior. Expulsion, which is a more severe punishment, is associated with a lower likelihood of students returning to school. One study shows that 1/5 students expelled under zero policy drop out of school within three years (Gurksy 2006).

This is also a community issue as children who experience repeat suspensions or expulsion are more likely to end up in juvenile court, eventually ending up in state custody, costing the state of Tennessee an average of $51,837 per year per child (Gurksy 2006). This is a problem not only for the children and the families but for the entire community. If nothing is done this will only get worse.
Alternative Solutions

One solution that has been offered as an alternative to zero tolerance policy has been to differentiate the way in which the students are taught. Each student learns differently. It is believed that one of the reasons for the misbehavior is because the students are bored or they are overwhelmed with the amount of work they need to do. So a way to counteract behavioral issues would be to offer different types of teaching styles. This would give students that may need more attention in the classroom, the attention that they need. By giving personalized, engaging teaching; students desire to act out for attention would decrease.

Another option that has been offered, is working with disobedient students one on one more often. If a teacher spends time getting to know one of their disobedient students and offers them attention and time, then it is more likely that these students will start to curb their bad behavior. It is also believed that problematic students’ needs are not being met at home. The less attention given at home, the more likely the student will seek out attention at school, often with behavioral outbursts. The more positive attention that these students receive from any type of authority figure whether it be a teacher or another faculty member, the less likely they are to act out in order to receive attention.

Proposed Policy Solution

The policy solution that we are proposing is a peer education program that will start when the children are in the third grade and continue through high school. This program will consist of the students learning proper communication skills and the negative consequences of improper communication. The students will also be taught conflict resolution techniques. By teaching the students these skills, will eventually self governing (Sumner, Silverman & Frampton). Because
students are able to talk about their problems and disagreements with their peers, they are less likely to act out in violent ways.

Currently some states and school districts are implementing programs that will help the child before zero tolerance policy is even needed. We are seeing this change is West Oakland at Cole Middle School in California (Sumner, Silverman & Frampton). The school population was dwindling and on the verge of closure. They needed to make a change. They introduced restorative justice incorporating circles into the plan. In the circle only one person could speak at a time and it was used for students to share their feelings but also in times of conflict to share their perspective. Many times upon the conclusion of the circle the students would agree to either apologize in person or in writing to the other. As time went on it became a common occurrence for children to look back on what they learned in the circle and incorporate into their daily lives as well as encouraging others to do the same. One student said, “what’s the point of fighting when you can just talk it out” (Sumner, Silverman, Frampton: 19). If more programs like this were implemented into schools around the country, you would see a decrease in zero tolerance punishments, leading to a higher graduation rate and less juveniles ending up in juvenile court (Sumner, Silverman & Frampton).

Since the introduction of this program at Cole Middle School, there has been a large decrease in the amount of students with negative behavior. The students were more likely to sit down and resolve their problems, than turning to violence. This program would be very cost-effective to implement in Knoxville. Specifically, in the state of Tennessee it costs over $50,000 a year per student who is entered into the juvenile court system (Gursky 2006). On the other hand, it would only cost about $4,000 for a school of teachers to be trained in peer education techniques (Gursky 2006). If peer education is introduced to a school and it prevents just one
student from acting out and entering the juvenile court system, then it will still have saved the state money.

With the introduction of this program, teachers would be able to express care for their students. This program shows students that their teachers and authority figures care about them and care about their future. This will decrease the likelihood of future behavioral problems.

We are also proposing that along with the implementation of the peer education program we consider a program that was implemented in Virginia known as the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. These guidelines help schools to look at the wide spectrum of behaviors that they see from their students and be able to handle those different behaviors properly resulting in a decrease in suspensions.

During an examination of school codes and the punishments that were given in regards to different infractions it was found that the punishments were very similar for minor behavioral infractions and major behavioral infractions. Therefore, rewriting the codes and working towards specifying the punishments to more suit the behavioral infractions would decrease the amount of suspensions. This is due to students no longer being suspended for minor infractions such as foul language or tardiness, and suspension being only reserved for major infractions. (Skiba, Loosen: 2015).

After the program was successfully introduced at Cole Middle School, the parents were also brought into the program where it was explained how they could continue to positively reinforce what the students were practicing at school.

We believe this solution is a great fit for Knoxville because it is cost-effective and it puts the children first by teaching them life-long lessons about conflict resolution.
Action Plan

This program can be introduced to a school system in a very short time span. The first step in introducing peer education is teacher training. The teacher education will take approximately four, two hour long segments. The first segment they learn the importance of the program and why the school system and the state are implementing this program. The second lesson will specifically work on the skills that the teachers will use to interact with their students. The third lesson will be focused on teaching the peer education program. In this lesson significant time will be spent in role play. The fourth session will continue role play, but this time focusing on teacher implementation of the new curriculum.

This program will be funded by the state, but the schools themselves will also have the opportunity to help fund the introduction of the program into their schools. With the introduction of this program schools will experience less expulsions and hopefully other prosocial outcomes such as higher graduation rates and test scores. The state will be saving a large amount of money paying for the teachers to be educated versus them paying for students to be in state custody. We would also like to implement a program in which high school students who have successfully gone through the program mentor the children that are entering the program. This, will not only help the high school students become more involved with their community but it will also show the young children the potential that exists for them.

Another funding opportunity would be the schools working to find private sector partners to fund the program. These private sector partners would invest money into the schools to help train the teachers on peer education and also for the implementation of the threat assessment guidelines. This practice is known as Social Impact Bonds, where private investors fund the programs and are seeking a return on their investments. They are able to improve their public
image, diversify their portfolios and possibly reap a financial return. Due to the implementation of peer education and updated threat assessment guidelines, we will see a decrease in the amount of suspensions leading to an overall decrease in the number of students who are entering the juvenile justice system. This saves the state a large amount of money because they are not having to pay over fifty thousand dollars a year per child in the juvenile system. Instead the money that the state would normally be spending on those students in the juvenile system can be spent on upgrades within the communities and also can be sent back to the schools in order to help them further implement the programs and help with the implementation of other programs to further advance the enrichment of their students. This way of funding the program would be very beneficial to the schools, the government, and the students it would also help the private investors that are funding the programs.

We will evaluate success by looking at the amount of disciplinary actions within schools, the number of juveniles within the court system, and graduation rates, before and after implementation. For this program we will reach out to school districts that see a large amount of suspensions or expulsions. We will reach out to lawmakers in the area that have a large amount of children in the court system. This program has the potential to see a large amount of success.
Work Cited


Sumner, M. and Silverman, C. and Frampton, M. “Implementing Restorative Justice at Cole Middle School”. Published by: University of California, Berkley School of Law.