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One Prescription Doesn't Cure All



BY JOHN O'BRIEN/FP

Elisabeth Franklin, assistant principal of Washington Irving Middle School in Fairfax County, defends the "zero-tolerance" policy of mandatory suspension of students who bring to school, to school property or to school-sponsored events any alcohol, illegal drugs, prescription drugs or over-the-counter drugs ["The Best Prescription for Avoiding Potential Trouble," Close to Home, March 8].

The policy makes sense: "Keep all medications out of the schools unless parents or guardians deliver them to the school clinic." But the procedures for addressing violations of this policy do not.

Franklin notes with near certainty that "children of this [junior high school] age will bring medication to school, and they will give it away to their friends." She observes that some children do not exercise "sound and consistent decision-making" and that "often their judgment is confused." This description does not sound like willful misconduct that merits mandatory suspension.

Shouldn't the failure of children to make the right decision trigger a response of more teaching? Mandatory punishment that fails to distinguish between an aspirin and cocaine takes "consistent decision-making" to an absurd extreme.

Zero tolerance sounds good, but it means that school authorities do not have the discretion to distinguish between serious cases and minor ones. Zero tolerance means that all offenders—whether their violation is

minor or serious, and whether it is deliberate or a result of being "confused"—receive equal punishment.

To students, zero tolerance means that school authorities can't be troubled to learn the facts of a case and weigh them before issuing a suspension. It means that consideration of the profound disruption of a student's education, determination of appropriate punishment and the consequences of a permanent disciplinary record are not as important to administrators as convenience and making an example of a student. What lesson does this teach students about due process and the meaning of justice?

To embrace zero tolerance in the schools is contrary to the idea that children are educated by ideas, information and reason. Why can't the lesson that "drugs are bad and should not be brought to school" be taught as effectively as anything else? When it comes to drugs, school administrators seem to be saying that they lack confidence in their ability to educate and in the capacity of their students to learn.

Drugs are a terrible problem in American schools. But when educators abandon education for cookie-cutter discipline, students don't learn respect for authority or for the law, and, judging from drug-use data, they don't learn to "just say no" either.

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