

Florida Department of Education's Position on Zero Tolerance

Recent changes to Section 1006.13, F.S., addressing zero tolerance policies in schools, require school boards to revise their zero tolerance policies to ensure that students who commit acts that pose a serious threat to school safety are expelled or referred to law enforcement, and that students are not expelled or arrested for petty acts of misconduct. Zero tolerance must be viewed within the context of the mission of public education: to educate all students to become successful adults upon graduation from high school. As educators we must maintain a successful learning environment and preserve the integrity of the classroom as we are responsible for the safety of ALL students. Schools should take proactive steps to prevent misconduct utilizing evidence-based practices and establish alternatives to suspension, expulsion, and arrests such as school-wide positive behavior support programs, restorative justice approaches, and civil citations.

While it is imperative for districts to establish clearly defined disciplinary procedures/actions for serious breaches of codes of conduct, it also is incumbent upon districts to use discretion and take a "common sense" approach to school discipline. District administrators must investigate and take into consideration mitigating circumstances (on a case-by-case basis) when determining appropriate disciplinary responses to student misconduct.

Efforts of the Florida Department of Education

■ Zero Tolerance Task Force

The Florida Department of Education continues to participate with other stakeholders on the Zero Tolerance Task Force and Disproportionate Minority Contact Workgroup. These efforts are lead by the Department of Juvenile Justice and bring a variety of perspectives to zero tolerance efforts.

■ Communication with School Districts

The Florida Department of Education provides guidance as needed and requested to school districts regarding the responsibilities of implementing zero tolerance policies.

■ FDOE Zero Tolerance Regional Meetings

The Florida Department of Education, in collaboration with the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Safe Schools Institute (School District of Palm Beach County), conducted seven regional full day training sessions throughout the state (Chipley, Orlando, Tampa, Boca Raton, Fort Myers, Gainesville, and Jacksonville). The purpose of this training was to:

- explore recent trends in suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement
- assist school and law enforcement personnel in understanding the intent and appropriate application of the zero tolerance statute
- encourage collaboration between schools and law enforcement to reduce the number of students referred to law enforcement for minor offenses
- identify a variety of alternatives to expulsion and arrest being utilized throughout the state and elsewhere, showing evidence of positive results

Approximately 300 participants were in attendance, representing school administrators, school district contacts, school resource officers and local law enforcement, as well as staff from the local Juvenile Assessment Centers.

Additional technical assistance addressing zero tolerance is made available through the Florida Department of Education's Office of Safe Schools via its Web site (www.fldoe.org/safeschools/), by telephone at (850) 245-0416 or through e-mail at sdfs@fldoe.org.