

Keep Kids in Class:

New Approaches to School Discipline



Summary

Zero-tolerance policies in Massachusetts school districts have had a harmful impact on many students, particularly at-risk students of color. At the time this report was written, Massachusetts law granted school administrators broad discretion in disciplinary decisions, which led many to adopt rigid, nondiscretionary zero-tolerance policies. While these approaches may create an appearance of fairness, they often result in disproportionately negative outcomes for certain student groups. Our research argues that truly fair school discipline requires a different approach—one that allows students to represent themselves through hearings and internal appeals, and that takes into account the intent behind their behavior.

10,000

Massachusetts high school students drop out each year; this number is impacted by discipline policies.

10 days

Is the threshold below which the state fails to track suspensions, creating an "invisible" punishment system.

6th-9th

Grade students are particularly at risk for being disciplined by exclusion.

0 Tolerance

Attitudes in school discipline practices have created critical public policy issues.

This Massachusetts Appleseed study indicates that shifting away from zero tolerance requires a deep dive into the school climate and individual student context. The following five data points are essential for meaningful reform:

- 1. The "Why" Behind Behavior**
Prioritizing an understanding of a student's life context to intervene before a conflict even starts.
- 2. Intent vs. Incident**
Distinguishing between "knowing and intentional" actions and accidental or non-threatening mistakes.
- 3. The Character of School Life**
Assessing interpersonal relationships and shared values to drive meaningful systemic reform.
- 4. The Full Student Story**
Empowering school teams to weigh specific incident details against a student's unique history.
- 5. Root Cause Identification**
Uncovering the specific emotional or environmental triggers of misconduct through a restorative lens.

Find the Full Report Here:

<https://tinyurl.com/2y3krxwe>

