

Zero Tolerance and an American Radical

“Zero Tolerance: Resisting the Drive for Punishment in our Schools”

Edited by William Ayers, Bernardine Dohrn and Rick Ayers

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“Zero tolerance means zero tolerance of threatening, weapons and bullying. We don’t give them an inch. We don’t give them chances.”

Elementary School Administrator

In the mid-nineties, a Chicago high school principal announced a new policy, one of zero tolerance. No longer would there be excuses for student misconduct. No longer would violations of major school rules, especially bans on drugs and guns, be tolerable. To many at the time, the new policy seemed to be redundant. There had never been any confusion that students were forbidden from bringing such objects to school. William Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn considered this policy unnecessary and when they questioned the principal about it, she responded that zero tolerance was “a contemporary way of expressing what we already believed and practiced” (Ayers xi).

However, since 1993, such policies have been emerging in schools across the nation. They grew out of an increasing fear of gang violence and juvenile delinquency that appeared to have skyrocketed coming out of the 1980’s. In 1994, the federal government mandated the program at a national level, and President Clinton signed the Gun-Free Schools Act into law (Skiba 373). The law requires a one-year expulsion for the possession of a firearm and referral of the violating students to a criminal justice center. In order to continue receiving federal funding, schools across the country rushed to comply with the policy.

While it seemed like a positive measure at first, accounts soon began to arise of abuse of the policies and possible racial discrimination. There were no provisions to standardize enforcement, and thus some students slipped through the system while others were severely punished for minor and trivial offenses (Curwin 120). Many of the most ridiculous stories have been widely publicized, including one about the expulsion of a second-grader for bringing his grandfather’s watch to show and tell (it happened to have a

1” pocketknife attached) (Skiba 375). Public outrage at zero tolerance has grown disproportionately as evidence of the policies’ discrimination and unequal enforcement has spread across the country. Instead of a tool to improve the environments of public schools, zero tolerance had become a method to get rid of underachieving and otherwise unwanted students (Curwin 120). If expelled, these students are left to the mercy of the streets and often get into more trouble there than if they were kept in school. As of now, few districts provide alternative education for expelled students, and thus zero tolerance expulsions are equal to educational death sentences (Dunbar 85). Unfortunately, the disproportionate majority of those expelled or suspended are minority students, thus making the policies even more troublesome (Dunbar 84).

In an age when school reforms are increasingly authoritarian and impersonal, it is imperative that the public gain an understanding of public school politics beyond government rhetoric. Many parents are altogether unaware of the policies in their children’s schools, and many of those who have experienced the wrong end of zero tolerance are completely unable to fight it (Dunbar 94). Zero tolerance policies are creating prisons out of America’s schools and criminals out of America’s schoolchildren (Skiba 382). There is far too little literature available to the average citizen on progressive school reform. Instead, most educational texts are written only to be read by educators themselves or the intellectual elite. “Zero Tolerance” is not one of those texts. Ayers and Dohrn structure their compilation in the hopes that “students and teachers, school-board members and community activists, juvenile courts attorneys and legislators examine these stories from the front lines” (Ayers xvi). If public schools are ever going to improve, it will not be because they criminalize a large proportion of their student body. Instead it will be because administrators, teachers, parents and community members seek to understand students and keep them in the education system, not kick them out. This book is meant to serve a catalyst in this process.

As founding members of the Weather Underground, William Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn were on the forefront of American radicalism. Living as fugitives, stealing explosives, and hiding from the law, the two were involved in the defining moments of their generation: the days of rage, SDS, the Black Panthers and ultimately the death of one of their best friends. Now, Dohrn and Ayers are married. Their

Weathermen days are behind them now. Ayers is a Distinguished Professor of Education and a Senior University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago. As an educator, he has taught courses on interpretive research, urban school change, teaching for justice and democracy, youth and the modern predicament, and the cultural contexts of teaching. As an author, he has compiled an extensive list of texts stressing the importance of progressive education reform. Dohrn, Clinical Associate Professor of Law and Director and founder of the Children and Family Justice Center at Northwestern University, is a child advocate as well as a teacher, lecturer and writer about children's justice and human rights. She is the author of a number of books on children's rights and education reform. Rick Ayers, is a teacher at Berkeley high school and the author of several books aimed at high school students.

Included in the book are essays from the editors and such notable activists as Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. and Pedro Noguera. In compiling this series of essays, the editors' hope is for "this volume [to] serve as a handbook for citizens" (Ayers xvi). They heroically proclaim in their introduction: "Now is the time for parents, teachers, citizens, and youth themselves to come together sensibly to resist zero tolerance," (Ayers xiv). Through this text they desire to awaken others to the perils of zero tolerance policies, provide background information and ultimately, produce means through which citizens can fight zero tolerance policies. Their methodology about this goal is through a series of essays by legal experts, educators and students that examine and deconstruct the rationale and results of zero-tolerance. It is with these efforts that the editors' thesis is accomplished - that zero tolerance policies are a form of abandonment and instead of recognizing and empowering, these programs push students (mainly poor minorities) out on the streets where they can no longer receive an education.

The Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr. writes in the foreword, "Fear of our children is at the heart of zero tolerance policies in our schools" (Ayers vii). It is around this thought that the rest of the book is structured. The various contributors attempt to illustrate the injustices that result from a preoccupation with "power over" our children, as Reverend Jackson states it (Ayers vii). Zero tolerance in the form of "power over" focuses on personal rather than societal misdeeds and effectively alienates and outcasts youth whom commit minor indiscretions. Instead, Reverend Jackson advocates a "power to do"

approach, where teachers and administrators recognize the potential in all children and instead of concentrating on disciplinary measures, and seek creative, educational solutions to the persistent societal ills that create student problems (Ayers vii). Zero tolerance policies only push children out of the school system, hereby ignoring the problems and potential of these students. Reverend Jackson concludes that all of us, as citizens, “owe it to ourselves to turn the tide on policies that simply do not work toward promoting a quality education in a safe environment for all youth,” and this book is a good first step in towards achieving this (Ayers xii).

“Zero Tolerance” is divided into three sections of about seven essays each. The first contains a series of narratives focusing on a number of students who have, by some measure of inconvenience, fallen on the wrong side of zero tolerance policies. In the second section, entitled “Social Context,” is a collection of statistic-rich essays that detail numerical results of zero tolerance discipline and provide in-depth analysis of actual policies. The final section, “Education and Activism,” includes more statistical evidence alongside the examination of the fundamental reasons behind zero tolerance, and finally, examples of schools succeeding outside the bounds of zero tolerance and proposals to further topple such disciplinary measures.

The first narrative of the book begins with the story of a mother confronted with a zero tolerance agreement when enrolling her five-year old daughter at a private pre-school. As the chapter progresses, the reader is confronted with various situations: in some, the students involved are presented seemingly overly harsh consequences for mild disciplinary infractions. In others, teachers reminisce on school policy before the arrival of zero tolerance. Most famously is the Decatur, Illinois case, in which six African-American students were expelled for two years after a fistfight at a football game. The extensive narrative details Reverend Jesse L. Jackson’s involvement in the case, which resulted in several pieces of legislation to the Illinois state legislature pertaining to expulsions. As an appropriate endnote, the section closes with a piece called “America Eats her Young.” Here, Gloria Ladson Billings highlights the various features of urban schools that force out and forget troubled children. Instead of finding creative ways to solve these students’ problem, zero tolerance shifts their problems elsewhere. When expelling students for one incidence of violence, “we seem to forget that making them

‘disappear’ from school does not make them disappear from the society’ (Ayers 80). Thus, while zero tolerance eliminates troubled children from schools, it simply places them in another arena, one in which they may indeed be more dangerous to themselves and others.

In the second section, as the title suggests, the contributors focus on the social context through which zero tolerance has arisen. The introduction to the section concludes with an ominous observation: “In a way, it should be no surprise that the criminalization of youth has extended into the schools” (Ayers 88). In her contribution, Bernardine Dohrn places the roots of the zero tolerance movement on the finding that, during the decade 1985 to 1994, “gang shootings catapulted juvenile homicide rates to three times their previous rates” (Ayers 89). Hence, American youth began to be regarded of as dangerous, and there was increasing political and parental pressure to keep those ‘dangerous’ kids out of schools. The quantitative evidence displayed in almost every essay show astounding rises in funding for nationwide prison spending (Ayers 93), adolescent arrests (Ayers 97) and juvenile incarceration (Ayers 103). Following essays call on media to stop covering issues of school violence disproportionately and school administrators to hesitate before systematically involving police and the juvenile justice system. Across the section, authors argue that excluding children from school will do nothing to maintain their interest in their education, and in most cases such action will only severely hinder the child in the future. Additionally, it appears many of those who fall victim to zero tolerance policies are eligible for special education services, but are not receiving any. Instead, many of them are sent to juvenile correctional centers where they are abused and largely ignored.

“Education and Activism,” the final section, opens with a more optimistic ideologue. The editors declare that “Education is always an arena of hope and struggle: hope for a better future, for a widened set of possibilities, for a broader horizon; and struggle over access and equity, quality and content” (Ayers 163). Although they largely focus on the obvious racial disproportions in zero tolerance policy, most of the essays in this section provide comprehensive and jargon-free suggestions to rethink zero tolerance. As a whole, their conclusions are similar in suggestion and substance. They agree that the most vital step to combating the culture of zero tolerance is for educators to

understand their students, not only as children but also the social environment that they come from. Pedro Noguera even suggests that such juvenile violence is a learned behavior, one that is taught from the “legitimate” forms of violence carried out by the police, military and courts (Ayers 216). The most widely proposed solution is the transformation of schools from places of discipline to sanctuaries of trust and caring. A common feature of many large schools is that the connections between adults and students are weak. By reducing the anonymity, alienation and impersonal character of schools, the hope is that students will retain a sense of belonging that would naturally reduce behavioral problems. When disciplinary methods do become necessary, schools should construct clear, objective discipline policies that allow for flexible application of sanctions and minimize the need for subjunctive interpretation by individual teachers (Ayers 174). In response to evidence of racial bias, teachers must be provided with training in appropriate and culturally competent methods of classroom management (Ayers 183). As a legal deterrent, the authors encourage parent involvement in discipline procedures. They urge parents and community activists to collect data on suspensions and, if necessary, file complaints with the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (Ayers 199). Specifically, those so involved should collect information on racial profiling and file lawsuits in the event that discrimination is apparent. However, each writer concludes that the only truly viable solution at this point is to act on the examples we have now and continue to explore, discuss and implement methods to fight the discrimination of zero tolerance.

In their introduction, the editors claim they intend to “explore the dangers of zero tolerance policies and examine the real alternatives” (Ayers xv). This collection of essays is organized as a first step, and introduction to the problems presented by zero tolerance policies and their enforcement. With this in mind, the book is organized rather efficiently. The first section of narratives provides an elaborate but clear illustration of the irrational enforcement of zero tolerance. Not only do they place the problem directly, but these accounts are compelling, and touching, meant to entrap the passive reader with tales of good children caught in bad situations. The contributors end their pieces with summaries of the lessons learned, and reminders of “the pressing need – the obligation – to research and tell [these] stories” (Ayers 41). Clichés are ever-present; one author ends

on the note, “I really believe some of our best leaders are going to come from these kids” (Ayers 14). Another concludes with a comment from Yogi Berra, a respectable and wise commentator in his own right but perhaps not the most fitting for a discussion of education reform. One cannot argue, the stories are powerful and moving, but they are ripe with attempts to strike the weakest string in the readers’ hearts. Perhaps such unapologetically emotive literature is necessary. It is far easier to win a person’s mind if you have first won their heart, and this is exactly what these authors intend to do. Additionally, they do write of the nation’s most important resource – the children – and children are infinitely important no matter how clichéd it becomes to speak in this manner. As can be expected in a compilation, the content from essay to essay becomes quite repetitive, but this is understandable and detracts very little from the effectiveness of the section. In a final, unrepentant tug, the last essay concludes with an observation: “Despite all the efforts of hardworking, decent people ... America still eats its young” (Ayers 84). How could an honest person resist?

Once the heart is convinced, the path is laid for the mind. That is exactly where part two, “Social Contexts” is directed. Looking at various collected numerical and qualitative data, the contributors in this section attempt to explain the reason and results America’s fear of youth. First, the editors frame the question in the form of an ‘us versus them’ relationship: “If teachers can only teach *your* child if they expel *that* child ... then the one child can be exiled for the good of the whole” (Ayers 88). Through a series of informative yet readable essays, the section covers a diverse list of grievances associated with zero tolerance. Largely written by attorneys and legal experts, these essays not only intensely thought provoking, but provide arguments that remain solidly rational and without losing their convincing nature. In order to fully examine the rise of zero tolerance culture, the first essay explores the criminalization of youth in American society. By presenting data that shows little increase in school violence and the ineffective execution of zero tolerance discipline policies Bernardine Dohrn’s argument is moderately successful in convincing the reader that such mindsets are irrational and counterproductive. The question remains however, since there is substantial evidence for violent youth behaviors, how truly irrational are zero tolerance policies? Dohrn answers with a simple reference to Florida congressman Bill McCollum, who stated on National

Public Radio that, “they’re the predators out there. They’re not children anymore. They’re the most violent criminals on the face of the earth” (Ayers 119). Not only is such an idea quite bewildering, it also gives important insight into the dangerous rhetoric beyond zero tolerance. In the following essays, contributors develop harsh criticisms of societal issues that contribute to zero tolerance mentalities. A host of unforgiving accusations blame media misrepresentation, mandatory sentencing and a public school system that largely ignore special education students for the failure of zero tolerance. Although the reader is inundated with numbers and evidence, by the end of this section one is left with a straightforward understanding of what exactly causes the zero tolerance mindset America.

Proper as a culmination, the last section of the book, “Education and Activism” begins with a welcome outlook, stating, “Education is always an arena of hope and struggle: hope for a better future, for a widened set of possibilities, [and] for a broader horizon” (Ayers 163). Similar to the last section, the essays of “Part Three” begin with a plentitude of data suggesting that not only is zero tolerance harmful in general but is discriminates on a racial and economic basis. While this information is vitally important, it is redundant and unnecessarily repetitive following the last section. It is already understood that zero tolerance policies, because of a lack of standards and options for implementation, are inherently discriminatory. What the reader needs instead are concrete suggestions for effective and available alternatives to zero tolerance. Luckily, Dohrn and the proceeding authors have included such suggestions as conclusions to their essays. A few of the contributors rely on tired rhetoric in their proposals, but the majority provide clear and viable solutions based on concrete evidence from schools that have succeeded. The recommendations focus on creating smaller, more intimate school setting, improving communication between students and school faculty and most importantly, creating clear, objective discipline policies that leave room for interpretation on a case by case basis. In fact, the only major weakness of this section is an essay on sexual harassment in K-12 schools that is disruptive and out of place. Sexual harassment is an issue that must be addressed, but as this essay only connects zero tolerance to the main thesis on sexual harassment as an afterthought, it disturbs the otherwise strong

argument presented by the surrounding essays. However, the disruption has no affect on the overall quality and effectiveness of the text.

“Zero Tolerance” provides a clear, fluid argument for the reform of public school disciplinary policies. Although constructing the book as a compilation sacrifices some of its efficiency, gathering such an assembly of educators, attorneys and community activists to decry the policies strengthens the argument exponentially. Ayers and Dohrn have successfully fulfilled their goal of providing a “handbook for citizens” (Ayers xvi). While their book is heavily emotional, it retains a strong rational argument, thereby successfully attacking zero tolerance on both levels. Readable diction and clearly presented data make this book accessible to all concerned citizens as well as intellectuals previously unaware of the problem. “Zero Tolerance” has the ability to speak to both groups with passion and intensity often lacking in educational reform. It is only reasonable that out of this book will flow rivers of rage and anger at zero tolerance policies, further moving citizens into action and raising our nation’s children to the level of care and respect they deserve.

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