

Opinion: ‘Get tough’ approaches won’t improve school safety in Gwinnett



Maureen Downey
7-8 minutes

In a guest column, [Russ Skiba](#), an Indiana University professor emeritus, and [Marlyn Tillman](#), executive director and co-founder of the Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline ([Gwinnett STOPP](#)), address [concerns](#) about the new discipline approach in the Gwinnett schools.

Skiba studies the overuse of exclusionary discipline and the factors that contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline. He was most recently the lead facilitator and organizer for the Discipline Disparities Research to Practice Collaborative, a group of national educators, researchers, advocates and policymakers who sought to advance knowledge and practice with respect to the effects of and interventions for disparities in exclusionary discipline.

A Gwinnett parent and community activist, Tillman advocates at the local, state and national level to end the school to prison pipeline. She is the federal strategies co-chair for the national Dignity in Schools Campaign and serves on the Education Civil Rights Alliance steering committee, the advisory committee of the Child Trends Healthy School Environments Initiative and the Gwinnett County Public Schools GEMS Committee, which reviews the curriculum.

By Russ Skiba and Marlyn Tillman

It is deeply tragic when students become the victims of any violence, especially those that result in death. Parents and caregivers, students, teachers and community members understandably turn to school district leaders for effective solutions.

In moments like these, there are two available paths. One is to carefully consider all the options and advance programs that have truly been shown to make schools safer. The other,

unfortunately, is to respond with fear and panic, demanding quick fixes through practices like zero tolerance or increased school policing — practices that have never been shown to be effective, and in fact may harm students.



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Those who advocate toughening school discipline, hardening schools with metal detectors, or increasing police presence call more preventive alternatives “soft” — as in soft on crime or, in this case, soft on disruptive students. But a better way to think about different approaches to school safety is to look at the “hard data” around each approach.

There is no evidence that any of those “get tough” approaches improve school safety in any way. Metal detectors are consistently associated with increased school crime. Exclusionary discipline doesn’t work and has never been shown to keep schools safe.

And contrary to the arguments of advocates for increased policing, there are [virtually no cases](#) in which school police have [prevented](#) a school shooting, but instead recent data shows [higher levels of casualties](#) when armed police are present.



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What is of even greater concern are the long-term effects of coercive disciplinary approaches. For example, higher rates of suspension and expulsion result in lower academic achievement, higher rates of school dropouts, and a greater likelihood of involvement with juvenile justice. The presence of school police has consistently been associated with higher dropout rates, more arrests for minor behavior, and higher rates of incarceration up to 10 years later. And these negative and harmful outcomes fall more harshly on students of color and students with disabilities.

Well-planned and carefully implemented alternatives to coercive discipline are, on the other hand, consistently supported by hard data demonstrating their effectiveness. Positive behavior interventions and supports have been shown to be effective in reducing office referrals, improving ratings of school climate, and even in some cases improving overall academic achievement. Restorative practices improve relationships among students, reduce suspension and expulsion, and improve school climate. Although building relationships between school staff and students may seem “soft” to some, it is emerging as one of the key elements in preventing disruption and violence.

Some claim that the disciplinary reforms instituted in August of this year by Gwinnett County Public Schools have caused the recent violence in the district by creating a lax disciplinary climate. That is extremely unlikely, however. Even the most effective districtwide programs typically take months or even years, not weeks, to show positive or negative effects.

The surge in student misbehavior this fall in Gwinnett schools is much more likely due to the negative and traumatic effects of disruptions caused by the pandemic. Schools across the country report increased behavioral and emotional problems among students who returned from the pandemic vulnerable and traumatized. Many schools were unprepared to meet those increased needs, and without sufficient mental health support, the problems have escalated.

The 1990s saw the rise of mass incarceration in criminal justice, and zero tolerance in schools. Like today, the rationale for those approaches was based in fear. Pundits and politicians stoked that fear with buzzwords and phrases like “an epidemic of crime” and “[superpredator](#)” — terms that have often been weaponized against Black youth.

Later, [more careful analyses](#) showed that school violence was [nearly stable from the early 1980s](#) on — there [never really was an increase](#) in school violence. The political scientist who popularized the term “[superpredator](#)” also [admitted over time](#) that there never were “superpredator youth” in schools and communities, and deeply regretted introducing the term. But the damage was done, as thousands of young lives — disproportionately Black lives — were irreparably harmed during the era of zero tolerance through harsh punishments and exclusion from school.

As [historian Benjamin Carter Hett](#) puts it in comparing us to previous generations: “We who come later have one advantage over them: we have their example before us.” We can learn from the mistakes made during the era of zero tolerance, which harmed so many students, especially students of color. Or we can repeat the errors made 30 years ago and get the same results. In the wake of recent tragedies, one can only hope that Gwinnett County will choose to stay the course on the promising reforms it began this fall and continue to expand programs that make schools safer and reduce school disruption.

When we witness violence done in schools, we fervently wish to find ways to prevent it and protect our children. But do we care enough about our children to make sure we give them school safety programs that really work?