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A better way to discipline students

Proposed state rules to reduce suspensions will produce better outcomes

By David Beard

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The scene on a Calvert County school bus at the beginning of the school year looked unremarkable and typical. At one point, a sixth-grade boy formed his fingers in the shape of a gun and pretended to shoot a classmate. Typical behavior, perhaps, for a boy at that grade level. The school responded with both an in-school and out-of-school suspension for the honor student. The student will now have a record categorizing his offense as a possession of a weapon.

This isn't the first time a school has handed down a harsh punishment for a misbehavior that could have been handled differently. Last spring a kindergartner was suspended for bringing his cowboy-style cap gun on a school bus, and then a 7-year-old was suspended earlier this year for chewing his breakfast pastry into the shape of a gun.

Some may say it is not a problem — these are but a few incidents. The reality is that more than 34,800 incidents like them occurred in 2011-2012, the last school year for which data are available. These suspensions were for such minor infractions such as disrespect or using a cell phone. This number represents 40 percent of the 85,372 suspensions and expulsions reported in Maryland. Even worse, many students receiving an out-of-school punishment were left at home without parental supervision.

There are no free passes — repercussions and consequences should be experienced by a student for any misconduct. However, suspensions rarely correct behavior. Instead, they contribute to high dropout rates and lower academic achievement. In addition, these policies are unequally applied. Students with disabilities and African-American students are two and three times as likely to be suspended or expelled than their white classmates who engage in comparable behaviors.

One thing is clear — school discipline reform is needed. Maryland now has an opportunity to do what is best for our kids and our communities.

The Maryland State Board of Education released proposed revisions to state school discipline regulations. These revisions include more effective parameters regarding suspension and expulsion and a more transparent appeals process, and they encourage districts to use alternative discipline approaches that have been proven effective. Anne Arundel County Public Schools shelved zero-tolerance policies and adopted a behavioral expectations framework designed to

help teachers and staff address problems immediately and more effectively. During the 2003-04 school year Anne Arundel schools suspended 7,576 students, or 10.3 percent. By 2011, there was full-scale implementation of the new approach, and the results were remarkable. The school district suspended 4,997 students, or 6.7 percent. That amounts to a 34 percent reduction in the number of students suspended.

Such reforms help disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline that moves students from school straight into the juvenile justice system. The connection between repeated, harsh punishment for minor infractions and future involvement in the juvenile justice system is well documented. The last thing this state needs is more children ending up in the pipeline because of a hand gesture or some other minor infraction that could be handled more effectively in school.

Enough is enough. Let's support the state school board and reform school discipline in Maryland.

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