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|  | **Zero-tolerance policies lack flexibility**  By Dennis Cauchon, USA TODAY  Lisa Smith was an honor student, a cheerleader and a Student Council member at Lakeview Middle School in the Dallas suburbs. She played violin in the school orchestra, won awards at the science fair and had just finished a highly praised project on the Holocaust for an honors history class.  But, one mistake later, the eighth-grader who had never known trouble faces five months in a military-style boot camp. Her offense: She violated the school's "zero tolerance" policy by bringing to school a 20-ounce bottle of Cherry 7-Up mixed with a few drops of grain alcohol.  Under the school's policy, officials say, they were compelled to give the academic death sentence to Lisa, 14 - even if her only other trip to the principal's office was to organize an orchestra fund-raiser, even if she is, in the words of one teacher, "a sweetheart."  Lisa Smith's case is one of a growing number of examples in which zero-tolerance policies have been attacked as inflexible, harsh and lacking in common sense. The criticisms have increased in the past two years as zero-tolerance policies have become standard operating procedure in the nation's 109,000 public schools .  Supporters have credited zero-tolerance policies with helping make students feel safer in school, but such policies also have come under fire for their all-or-nothing approach. Even many supporters say the get-tough effort too often fails to differentiate between good kids who make the typical mistakes of adolescence and the unruly delinquents who can bring learning to a standstill.  Eighty-seven percent of all schools now have zero-tolerance policies for alcohol and drugs, often resulting in mandatory expulsion, no matter how small the infraction. Ninety-one percent of schools have adopted zero-tolerance policies for bringing a weapon to school.   But policies vary widely on the severity of the punishment and the discretion that school principals have.   Much of the criticism is aimed at the districts with the most rigid policies. Kids have been kicked out of school for possession of Midol, Tylenol, Alka Seltzer, cough drops and Scope mouthwash - contraband that violates zero-tolerance, anti-drug policies. Students have been expelled for Halloween costumes that included paper swords and fake spiked knuckles, as well as for possessing rubber bands, slingshots and toy guns - all violations of anti-weapons policies.   A second-grader from Alexandria, La., was booted for bringing her grandfather's gold-plated pocket watch to school; the timepiece had a tiny knife attached.  Supporters of policies that expel students for every offense say the policy might be painful but is needed to send an unambiguous message that drugs and weapons have no place in school.  But most of the nation's leading advocates of zero tolerance count themselves among those worried by the excesses. They say school administrators are undermining the credibility of zero-tolerance systems by pursuing silly cases and failing to understand that zero tolerance includes a range of punishments, including a note home or after-school detention.  **Punish, don't destroy**  "Zero tolerance and expulsion don't have to go hand in hand," says Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center in Westlake, Calif. "Zero tolerance simply means all misbehavior will have some sanction. It doesn't mean you bring the maximum punishment for every transgression."  "I'm terribly embarrassed when I read about some of these cases," says Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers, the nation's second largest teachers union, which has pushed hard for zero-tolerance policies. "These are examples of adults not exercising proper responsibility. I'm always in favor of just plain common sense."  In Lisa Smith's case, another eighth-grade girl brought alcohol to school the same day. That girl's mix of Kool-Aid and Bacardi rum, along with Lisa's concoction of Cherry 7-Up and grain alcohol, created quite a stir in the school cafeteria as students passed the drinks around.  Eleven girls got expelled. The girl who brought the rum accepted her sentence of expulsion and boot camp. Eight students said they didn't know the drinks contained alcohol, and their expulsions were overturned. One moved away. Lisa Smith hired a lawyer.  Her parents agree she should have been punished. They took away all her privileges - telephone, TV, stereo - and reduced her room to just a desk and a bed.  "Expulsion and boot camp? The punishment far exceeds the severity of the crime," says her father, Charlie Smith, a quality assurance inspector for an aerospace company.  "Punish her, yes, but don't try to destroy her. She made one mistake. She is not a juvenile delinquent," says Ann Smith, her mother.   Lisa says she stupidly brought the alcohol to school on a whim, just to see if she could get away with it. She poured the alcohol into the Cherry 7-Up while her mother waited for her in the car. Now she fears that her academic destiny will be permanently damaged by the severity of her punishment. "Just the term 'boot camp' scares me. I'm not a very physical person," she says.  Her lawyer, David McCreary, says the penalty was more severe than if she had been charged with a crime. If she had been convicted in juvenile court of underage possession of alcohol, she would have faced a ticket and a fine, not boot camp.   School officials say they were just following the rules.  Lisa was expelled because "that's what school board policies specify," says Lakeview Middle School Principal Steven Nauman, who has a doctorate in **education**. "I have to agree with anything that's policy. My opinions are inconsequential. Citizens may not like speeding and no-parking signs, but we enforce them."  Lisa Smith's parents have asked a court to let her back in school on grounds she was not treated fairly.  Zero-tolerance policies started sweeping the country in 1994 after Congress required states to adopt laws that guaranteed one-year expulsions for any student who brought a firearm to school. All 50 states adopted such laws, which were required to receive federal funding.  Read the rest of the article at http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/educate/ednews3.htm | |