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Zero Tolerance, Zero Common Sense? Author Proposes Widespread School Security Reform

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Sep 14, 2010

Police officers, armed security guards, surveillance cameras and metal detectors are now commonplace at schools across the country. They go hand in hand with zero tolerance policies adopted by school systems in the wake of highly publicized outbreaks of violence. In a new book, *Homeroom Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear* author Aaron Kupchik argues that these policies need to be reassessed to include some flexibility and more common sense. Research at four public high schools helped shaped Kupchik's argument. He compiled more than 100 hours of interviews with students, administrators, teachers and police officers assigned to each of the schools located in the nation's Southwest and Mid-Atlantic regions. The University of Delaware Associate Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice shared his perspective with **JJIE's Chandra R. Thomas**.

First off, you're Delaware based. What do you know about what's happening in Georgia?

I'm really interested in the work of (Clayton County) Juvenile Court Judge **Steve Teske**. We met at a conference. He is very charismatic and he's doing a lot of things to limit the school to prison pipeline. He's trying to have a more common sense approach to reduce the number of kids getting arrested. He's trying to deal with kids out there in a more approachable way. Legislatures across the country are reacting with policies that are based more out of fear rather than common sense. What they should be doing is recognizing a problem, collecting data and proposing solutions that work.

What inspired you to write the book?

I was doing work sitting in court when I saw the case of a 6-year-old who had been arrested. His teacher had taken away his treats and he threatened to blow up the school. It was ridiculous. Even the judge said it was ridiculous. We've been seeing more and more cases like that. So the book idea just grew from there.

In your research for the book, you studied four schools comprised of different racial and economic demographics. What did you take away from your observations?

I found surprising similarities between the four schools. There was a lot they did right, but I also found that many of the policies were counterproductive. Discipline is often taken so far that it gets in the way of academics. There's so much emphasis on discipline that it becomes the focus of the school. It has become so central to what happens that we lose sight of the needs of the students. We need more flexibility when working with kids.

What's an example?

Students acting up in class tends to be a big problem. A lot of the teachers told me that most of the time kids act up because they don't understand the material. So kids act up and what do we do? We kick them out of class. So they lose instruction time and understand the material even less when they return. Kicking them out might help the



Author Aaron Kupchik says

teacher at that moment but is that solving the real problem? I understand that the kid needs to be removed at that time, but why not follow that up with some after-school tutoring? What usually happens is that the (disruptive) student is put in in-school suspension where they're supposed to do their schoolwork, but they usually do nothing.

What else did you learn?

Teachers tend to get very little training on classroom management. Some teachers are better at it than others. Why not have the teachers who are better at it, train those who aren't? There are a wealth of resources available like that, that aren't being taken advantage of.

One of your main assertions in the book is that the zero tolerance policies prevalent in schools now were primarily sparked in the 1990s by the federal government's Safe and Drug Free Schools Act. It required schools to implement zero tolerance for certain things like weapons.

Yes. A lot of schools started enacting these rules to get federal zero tolerance dollars. That's when you began to see a lot of these cases where kids were getting in trouble for having something like Cub Scout knives and aspirin. That's why zero tolerance policies are so problematic. Symbolically it creates a very undemocratic way of operating schools. Zero tolerance is supposed to be across the board to reduce disparities but it doesn't work. A lot of the teachers and administrators I spoke to agreed that there is room for flexibility and interpretation in zero tolerance policies. The problem is that it sets a climate where we're saying we won't talk about it. You were caught doing something wrong and we won't talk about it.

Many could argue that these policies are absolutely necessary to protect innocent students, especially in the wake of Columbine. What do you say?

I disagree that Columbine and cases like it should be used as a reason. Columbine is a horrible tragedy that we should learn from, but it should not be used as the basis for public policies. The research shows that school violence is actually quite rare. Schools are actually the safest place for children. You're more likely to be struck by lightning than to be killed in a school. School violence has been decreasing for the past 15 years. The number of deaths in schools has remained pretty steady – less than 20 per year. Let me be clear. There are some schools with violence problems, but that is incredibly rare. I'm not saying we should not punish kids when they misbehave, but we need to do it sensibly and in a way that addresses the real problems.

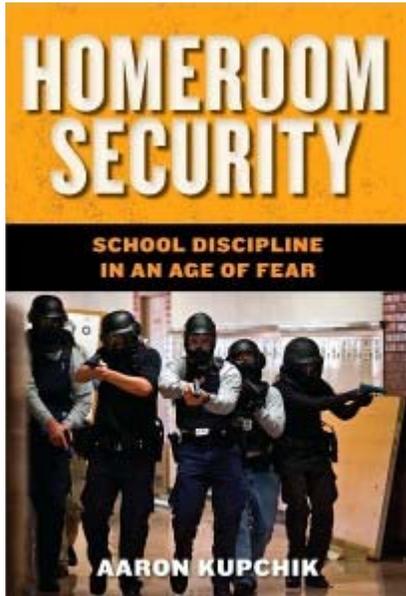
What do you propose?

Research shows that when there is a more democratic climate, where students feel that their voices are heard there tends to be less problems. Zero tolerance is the opposite of that. We need discretion for when a case comes up. We need a system that employs some common sense. We communicate a harmful message, a bad tone, to our students when that takes place. We are teaching them that the way to solve conflict is not to discuss it, just squash it. We're teaching them an authoritarian approach as opposed to a democratic one.

Some would argue that the very zero tolerance policies and the placement of surveillance cameras and school resource officers in schools have contributed to the decrease. What's your response?

There have been very few evaluations on the impact of those measures and the few that were done were not of very good quality. There is no evidence that these school policies have had an impact on school

violence. In fact, there's indirect evidence that they may have actually made it worse. Why? Because it tends to erode the things we know to help decrease school crime like a democratic environment where students feel heard.



What do you suggest should take place when a student does violate a school rule?

Children need to be dealt with seriously. For example if they bring in a drug, then they should be removed from school but they need to be put into drug counseling. We need to be asking ourselves *what's wrong with this child* and focus on ways to change the behavior. The majority of kids are getting suspended for being disrespectful, not violent acts.

You say in the book that you want more counselors at schools. Why?

A lot of the guidance counselors say they're so busy with scheduling and college placement that they don't have the time to do anything else.

Isn't that why school resource officers are in most schools now? Could they be trained to counsel students?

In a peaceful school, there should be more counselors and less police officers. Only schools with documented violence problems should have police officers on site. We're asking these resource officers to be counselors to these kids but they're not trained in that area. We need to

"Columbine is a horrible tragedy that we should learn from, but it should not be used as the basis for public policies," says Kupchik.

have police officers being police officers and counselors being counselors. A police officer can't create a completely safe space for children to talk. For one, they've been trained to respond differently and if they learn of a criminal act they have to act on that.

Have you seen any policy changes in schools recently or does it appear that the systems are basically content to sticking with these policies?

There have been some improvements. Louisiana passed a measure to focus more on counseling kids than punishment. And I was a member of a task force in Delaware that consulted the legislature on a measure that was passed to reduce the number of students arrested at school. Those are positive signs, but I'm not sure that they represent any changes in the whole country.

What do you hope to achieve with your book?

The best outcome would be for us all to look more critically at these policies. What we are doing has lots of problems and we tend to assume that zero tolerance keeps kids safe. It's uncritically accepted and that's a problem. I wish that we could just talk about it more. I hope we can create a forum for parents, teachers and administrators about how we can better protect our children.

Got a juvenile justice story idea? Contact JJIE.org staff writer Chandra R. Thomas at cthom141@kennesaw.edu. Thomas, a former Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow and Kiplinger Public Affairs Journalism Fellow, is an award-winning multimedia journalist who has worked

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Harold Lewis

September 13, 2010 | 9:41 am

Wow, an intelligent discourse on an often inflammatory subject that typically emits more heat (i.e. much noise and shouting) than light (i.e. understanding and solutions)! Great interview and thanks for giving this book and author more attention. Nice tie to Atlanta as well via Judge Teske.
