

# Momentum Grows Against Zero Tolerance Discipline and High-Stakes Testing

Judith Browne Dianis, Rhonda Brownstein, Jessica Feierman, and Monty Neill

*Published on Anthony Cody's blog, Living in Dialogue, Nov. 7, 2013*

Across the country, resistance is growing against public education's increased dependence on high-stakes standardized testing and on exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests. Whether from grassroots demonstrations, test boycott and opt-out campaigns, school board resolutions, or Congressional hearings on discipline, the message is the same: "Enough is enough!"

Parents, students, teachers and communities increasingly recognize what the research community has already established: overreliance on exclusionary discipline and high-stakes testing does not improve achievement or make schools safer. Instead, these practices damage opportunities to learn, particularly for our most vulnerable youth. The two policies are intertwined, with both having dramatically intensified in the NCLB era. <http://www.fairtest.org/position-paper-nclb-and-school-prison-pipeline> State and federal governments must overhaul both to ensure that all children can succeed in a high-quality learning environment.

Truly outrageous cases related to discipline and testing often garner public attention. Six-year-old Christian, permanently expelled for "inappropriately touching" his kindergarten teacher; fifteen year-old Damien, expelled for a first offense of possessing a cell phone; sixteen-year-old Roger, "encouraged" to drop out weeks before standardized testing; young children breaking down in tears, even vomiting, as they face test after test in increasingly dreary classrooms. These cases are the tip of the iceberg.

Exclusionary discipline policies exacerbate the already serious racial skew in the justice system. The UCLA Civil Rights Project reported that schools suspend black students at more than three times the rate of whites. <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/news/press-releases/2013-press-releases/out-of-school-and-off-track-reports-detail-disturbing-and-increased-use-of-suspensions> This widens the opportunity gap. A student who is suspended or expelled is nearly three times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year. Justice system involvement – especially secure confinement – actually increases recidivism. Nationally, about 70% of youth who have been incarcerated drop out of school.

Since the tragic shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, many school administrators are instituting or adding to existing school police forces, even though research indicates that more guns and policing don't make schools safer. After the Columbine High massacre, federal and state governments and local school districts adopted "zero tolerance" policies and rapidly increased deployment of law enforcement officers in schools. The result was damage to educational environments and tens of thousands more students being pushed out of schools and into the juvenile and criminal systems.

High-stakes testing, from determining high school graduation to judging schools and teachers, causes similar damage. <http://fairtest.org/how-standardized-testing-damages-education-pdf> The National Research Council (NRC) found that graduation tests increase the dropout rate without improving learning or college or job readiness. NRC also concluded that No Child Left Behind – which has promoted teaching to the test at the cost of a narrow and dull curriculum – failed to improve learning outcomes. Since NCLB started, the rate of improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress has declined in both reading and math at all grade levels for almost all groups, in both subjects, at all grade levels. <http://fairtest.org/detailed-fairtest-study-naep-results-shows-nclb-ha>

The Obama Administration’s Race to the Top and NCLB waiver programs further intensified the role of high-stakes exams. No other nation has as much standardized testing as the U.S. Educationally successful countries do not base school or teacher evaluations on their students’ scores.

Now the tide is turning. In the past decade, dozens of reports documented the damage caused by overreliance on exclusionary discipline and called for alternatives. Professional associations such as the American Psychological Association and the American Bar Association have taken strong stands against “zero tolerance” school discipline. So have conservative advocates such as Right on Crime and law enforcement groups such as Fight Crime Invest in Kids.

The federal Departments of Justice and Education announced a Supportive School Discipline Initiative. Some state legislatures, both Republican and Democratic controlled, passed legislation to reform exclusionary discipline policies. Most state applications for NCLB waivers included plans to improve school climate and discipline. The Dignity in Schools Campaign called for a national moratorium on out-of-school suspensions; more than 50 education and civil rights groups signed the statement. And the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, *Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, brought wide attention to the issue.

On the testing front, grassroots momentum for reform surged last spring. <http://fairtest.org/spring-2013-testing-reform-uprising> Parents and students ‘opted out’ of testing in communities across the nation. Students walked out on tests and held rallies in several cities. More than 880 Texas school boards, representing 91 percent of the state’s students, endorsed a resolution opposing high-stakes testing – then parents and educators organized a successful legislative campaign to eliminate 10 of 15 graduation tests. Teachers in Seattle high schools boycotted the MAP test, pushing the district to drop it. More than 550 organizations and 18,000 individuals have signed the National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing. <http://timeoutfromtesting.org/nationalresolution/> In New York, more than 1,400 principals signed a statement, and hundreds of academics endorsed a public letter, against the state’s testing policies. The past two months saw 1500 people on Long Island and 2500 in Buffalo rally against high-stakes testing. Increasingly, newspaper editorial boards question the value of the expanding use of high-stakes exams. More and more candidates for local or state office criticize over-reliance on testing. And some local superintendents are cutting back on district testing requirements.

Discipline and testing problems are clearly linked. <http://www.advancementproject.org/resources/entry/test-punish-and-push-out-how-zero-tolerance-and-high-stakes-testing-funnel> High-stakes testing sucks the joy out of school.

Teachers conclude they must keep students moving quickly through the curriculum. Kids who are disengaged or angry over unending test prep instead of real education may act out. School personnel often overreact and impose exclusionary discipline or call in law enforcement. Disciplinary pretexts are often used to push out low-scoring students. When students are expelled, suspended or pushed out, they are not engaged in academic learning. Many fall further behind and never graduate.

Curtailing the misuse of tests is needed to help create a positive school climate. Sharply reducing the use of exclusionary discipline is essential to ensure students are in the classroom and learning. Addressing these problems requires changes to federal and state laws on both discipline and testing.

Our organizations have identified several necessary reforms:

- End zero-tolerance disciplinary laws, policies and practices.
- Promote school-wide positive behavioral supports, restorative justice, and other approaches that have been proven to improve school climate and discipline without reliance on exclusion or justice system involvement.
- Roll back the amount of standardized testing and dramatically lower the stakes for students, teachers and schools.
- Support classroom and school-based assessments and accountability metrics that enhance teaching and learning. <http://fairtest.org/fact-sheet-multiple-measures-definition-and-exampl> Provide accurate, comprehensive public information on school effectiveness through independent evaluation of student work samples. Develop school quality review programs to deliver rich information about school practices, strengths, and weaknesses. Models exist for these approaches. <http://fairtest.org/fact-sheet-better-way-evaluate-schools-pdf>
- Gather school, district and state data on school climate and discipline. Use it to ensure a welcoming environment for all students. Surveys and quality reviews can inform the public about these essential aspects of good schools.
- Develop reliable information on whether schools have adequate resources [http://www.edaccountability.org/OTL\\_final\\_2-11.pdf](http://www.edaccountability.org/OTL_final_2-11.pdf) to meet the educational needs of their students - data that can be used to fight for meeting those needs.
- Address the widespread failure to provide a decent education to incarcerated youth. Ensure the successful reintegration of ex-prisoner students into public schools.

State and federal governments are taking some healthy, if small, steps. Now they must join the momentum started by parents, students, teachers, and community advocates who are addressing these closely linked issues. When they do, we just might find that dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, by changing testing and discipline, is within our grasp.

***Authors:***

Judith Browne Dianis, Advancement Project, <http://safequalityschools.org> and <http://advancementproject.org>

Rhonda Brownstein, Education Law Center (PA), <http://www.elc-pa.org>  
Jessica Feierman, Juvenile Law Center, <http://www.jlc.org>  
Monty Neill, FairTest, <http://www.fairtest.org>

[http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2013/11/momentum\\_grows\\_against\\_zero\\_to.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2013/11/momentum_grows_against_zero_to.html)