Student Essay

English 098 Final Essay

May 2016

Making the Alternative the Default

           In high school, I was emergency expelled: taken out of school in handcuffs, delivered to my weak hearted grandmother, and kept out of a week’s worth of school.  This was all because I expressed myself with a violent drawing of my math teacher, who at the time, had been harassing me since the start of the year by sending me to the security office for numerous things, such as not taking candy from him or leaving the classroom as he instructed.  The zero tolerance policy labeled me right then and there a violent threat to the school’s community.  After I had been let back into school, the teacher in question was fired for misconduct involving more students than just me, and the expulsion was expunged from my record. However, despite this justice, I am one of the lucky ones.  Not all get this ending, and that one mistake could have ruined my high school career, forever labeling me as a violent individual.  Because it creates harsh punishment for small offenses in schools such as the one I endured and pushes our youth into the “School-to-Prison-Pipeline,” the zero tolerance policy should be eliminated by implementing the ideas and strategies from alternative schools in common schools.

           In “Turning off the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” Harry Wilson sheds some significant light on the zero tolerance policy that is implemented across our nation.  He describes the zero tolerance policy as a weakness rather than strength, even though we were convinced that this policy would help the war on rising crimes. He explains that most students expelled from schools don’t even participate in major crime offenses and normally end up being a situation like mine where the student does not conform to a teacher’s orders, does not abide by a dress code, or just has some behavioral issues that need more attention than common public schools give to their students.

           When students have proven to be too much to handle, they are sent to an alternative school, which is described in “Alternative Schools” by Rebecca J. Frey. These are school that provide second chances for students who don’t benefit well from common public schools. So, if alternative schools are commonly used for students who just need the extra attention, then why not just implement these requirements in common schools and provide the extra attention before it’s too late?

           Frey explains that teachers are more qualified in alternative schools to better fit the needs of the students, which greatly decreases the number of students being targeted for suspension or expulsion because the teachers are more geared to handle troubled students and have more effective teaching tools to make learning interesting. There is no doubt that a more qualified teacher in my situation would have benefitted me greatly.

           Frey also mentions that students in alternative schools have mandatory counseling to monitor any behavioral issues they might be struggling with.  As mentioned by Harry Wilson, many students who are targeted by the zero tolerance policy have behavioral issues. Implementing mandatory counseling could provide a wonderful support system for students who have issues in the classroom setting or even at home, which we all know can affect a child’s learning environment as well.

           The last and most important idea that Frey mentions benefitting students in alternative schools are smaller class sizes, which are supported in an article titled “Class Size” by Susan L. O’Donnell.  O’Donnell explains that many studies prove the beneficial effects on students when teachers have fewer students in their classrooms.  Fewer students mean more attention from the teachers and less stress for the teachers who now do not have to manage thirty to forty children in one setting.  O’Donnell points out that there are some critics who do not support smaller class sizes and claim their studies show little to no significant results.  However, O’Donnell explains that little results are better than none and that most teachers will not know how to beneficially utilize a smaller class size if they have never had one before.  Smaller class sizes would require different teaching methods and create a more personal experience for the students. This change would benefit both the students and teachers greatly.

           Zero tolerance has torn many students’ lives apart by one small mistake, one small outburst, one small offense that could have been handled in a different, less serious manner. The common schools should abolish the zero tolerance policy and start to implement the changes that alternative schools require that benefits the students greatly whether their struggle is behavioral or not. We need to make many more changes in order to abolish mistreatment of students or overreaction of teachers or administrators. More qualified teachers, mandatory counseling, and smaller class sizes are a very good start.  Making the alternative the default could just be the change we need to create a better learning environment and, in turn, a better society.

Works Cited

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