

A Study of Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools: A Multi-Integrated Systems Approach to Improve Outcomes for Adolescents

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PROBLEM: School officials throughout the United States have adopted zero tolerance policies to address student discipline, resulting in an increase in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. The introduction of police on school campuses also increased the referral of students to the juvenile courts. Although school personnel generally view zero tolerance policies as a constructive measure, this approach denies recent research on adolescent brain development that mischief is a foreseeable derivative of adolescence.

METHODS: A case study method examined one juvenile court's innovative multi-integrated systems approach related to the adverse trends associated with zero tolerance policies.

FINDINGS: A multi-disciplinary protocol resulted in more effective youth assessments that reduced out-of-school suspensions and school referrals; increased graduation rates by 20%; and decreased delinquent felony rates by nearly 50%. The resulting protocol changed how the system responds to disruptive students by significantly reducing out-of-school suspensions and school referrals, and putting into place alternatives as well as providing community resources to address the underlying causes of the behavior.

CONCLUSION: A multi-systems approach that targets the reasons for disruptive behavior improves student educational and behavioral outcomes.

Public education in the United States is replete with inequalities that are defined along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. These inequalities more often than not produce lower graduation rates contributing to higher rates of criminality among our youth (Mendez, 2003). Recent educational policies have exacerbated the problem with the advent of standardized and mandated graduation tests. As many as 58% of minority students in the ninth grade do not graduate (Wald & Losen, 2003). Despite the overwhelming data reflecting the adverse impact of these inequalities and testing standards, there appears to be little to no effort among policy makers to ameliorate the problem. On the contrary, it appears that policy makers, in an attempt to address school discipline using a zero tolerance approach, have increased the racial and ethnic gap while simultaneously widening the net to include students with diagnosable mental health problems (Skiba et al., 2006). Recent research indicates the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance strategies in secondary public schools, how such strategies are harmful to children, and how such policies actually increase risks to school and community safety.

Using a systems model, it is revealed that school systems in general are limited in their resources to adequately respond to disruptive behavior, creating an overreliance on zero tolerance strategies. The purpose of this article is to show the importance of connecting the school system with other systems serving students to assess disruptive students and access alternative modalities to treat the underlying reasons for the disruptive behavior that can reverse the negative outcomes of zero tolerance.

Literature Review: the Problem With Zero Tolerance Policies

Definition of Zero Tolerance

The history and etymology of the term "zero tolerance" can be traced back to the 1980s during State and Federal efforts to combat drugs, or what became known during the 1980s as the "war on drugs." It was not long before the term was applied to various subjects, including environmental

pollution, trespassing, sexual harassment, to name a few. Arguably, its widespread application to minor offenses can be attributed to the “Broken Windows” theory of crime (Kelling & Coles, 1997). This theory analogizes the spread of crime to a few broken windows in a building that go unrepaired and consequently attract vagrants who break more windows and soon become squatters. The squatters set fires inside the building, causing more damage or maybe destroying the entire building. The broken windows theory argues that communities should get tough on the minor offenses and clean up neighborhoods to deter serious crimes. Thus, it becomes necessary to punish minor offense violators.

By the early 1990s, school systems began to adopt this “Broken Windows” approach, or zero tolerance, for minor school infractions by suspending students for up to 10 days. These infractions typically involved fighting, disruption in school, and smoking. This is evident in the near doubling of students suspended annually from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2001 (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2000). The most incongruent use of out-of-school suspension (OSS) is for truancy infractions. Suspending a student who does not want to attend school is illustrative of the inherent problems with zero tolerance policies, and has led some to refer to zero tolerance as “zero intelligence” or “zero evidence” (Richardson, 2002).

Considering its origin and use over the years, zero tolerance can best be defined as a “philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the seriousness of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (Skiba et al., 2006). The severity and punitive nature of zero tolerance practices escalated with the placement of police on school campus, resulting in a considerable increase in the number of students arrested and referred to juvenile court for infractions once handled by school administrators. The study of this occurrence has been referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Within the context of school discipline, zero tolerance policies operate under the assumption that removing disruptive students deters other students from similar conduct while simultaneously enhancing the classroom environment. As the research below shows, this assumption fails to consider various factors that impede the zero tolerance policy goal of maintaining a safe and disciplined learning environment.

Effects of Zero Tolerance Approaches

Zero tolerance policies are generally viewed by school systems as a viable approach to school discipline to maintain safe classrooms. However, professionals in other related fields such as mental health, social services, and the courts have begun to question the effectiveness of these policies, resulting

in various studies on the matter. The studies to date show that zero tolerance strategies have not achieved the goals of a safe and disciplined classroom. On the contrary, some studies suggest that such strategies are harmful to students and may make schools and communities less safe (Wald & Losen, 2003).

School as a Protective Factor

Students bring to school their unique individual and environmental characteristics, some of which may produce negative behaviors (Barber & Olsen, 1997). Negative characteristics are referred to as *risk factors* that, if untreated, may lead to disruptive conduct, delinquency, and even more negative behaviors.

The *risk principle*, as used in the field of corrections, has useful application in understanding the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance policies within the school setting. In the context of juvenile justice, risk is defined as a child’s probability to commit a crime, or to re-offend. Studies consistently show that factors predicting the risk of delinquent behavior include antisocial attitudes, associates, personality, and a history of antisocial behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 1998). Other risk factors include substance abuse and alcohol problems, family characteristics, education, and employment (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). The importance of assessing risk factors is reflected in studies showing that intensive interventions are required in high-risk youth to reduce recidivism. Conversely, studies show that intensive interventions applied to low-risk youth increase the risk of re-offending (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990). Today, many juvenile justice systems use an objective risk assessment, a tool that measures the child’s risk to re-offend, to determine which offenders are in need of intensive supervision and treatment. Without it, many low-risk youth would be harmed by too much intervention.

Because being in school is a protective factor against delinquent conduct (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001), suspending and removing students from school for normal teenage behaviors is counterproductive. Besides being counterproductive, suspension increases the risk of antisocial and delinquent behaviors. Zero tolerance policies apply sanctions across the board regardless of the risk level of the student. Studies have found that disciplining harshly with OSS and criminal sanctions regardless of the risk level of the student exacerbates the problem by making students worse (Andrews & Bonta, 1998; Mendez, 2003). A longitudinal study on the disciplining of elementary and middle school students found that OSS is a predictor of future suspensions (Mendez, 2003). The study also found that OSS contributes to poor academic performance and failure to graduate.

The research shows that students handled by punishment alone are less likely to succeed (Mendez, 2003). This finding is the same for youth in the correctional setting; that is, the

use of punishers to modify behavior increases the risk of re-offending (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006; Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2004).

The Surgeon General's report on youth violence indicated that a child's connection to school was one of only two protections against risk factors for violence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Other studies found that students' belief that adults and peers in school care about them is related to lower levels of substance abuse, violence, suicide attempts, pregnancy, and emotional distress (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Studies also reveal that this belief, referred to as school connectedness, is linked to school attendance, graduation rates, and improved academics (Rosenfield, Richman, & Bowman, 1998; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

The research shows that students who disrupt are typically not assessed to determine the reasons for the behavior (Mendez, 2003). The failure of schools to assess disruptive students may be explained by the goal of zero tolerance policies, which focus solely on punishment as a tool to modify behavior and which minimize the need to ask why a student is disruptive.

Mental Health

Although there have been less data collected regarding the impact of zero tolerance on students with diagnosable mental health disorders, a report by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force stated that "students with disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioral disorders, appear to be suspended and expelled at rates disproportionate to the representation in the population" (Skiba et al., 2006). Studies of youth with mental health disorders in the juvenile justice system support this position of the task force. A report of the Surgeon General found higher rates of mental disorders among the youth in the juvenile justice system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). The Texas Youth Commission (TYC) reported a 27% increase in the number of youth with mental disorders entering the juvenile justice system between 1995 and 2001 (Reyes and Brantley, 2002). In 2001 alone, the TYC reported that 67% of the intakes were for nonviolent offenses (Reyes & Brantley, 2002). School systems have become the greatest feeder of the youth into the system since the inception of zero tolerance policies (Rimer, 2004).

Children with mental or emotional disorders are prone to have academic difficulties, and are less likely to succeed if subjected to suspension and expulsion. One study found that 73% of youth with serious emotional disorders who did not graduate were arrested within 5 years (Garfinkle, 1977; Wagner et al., 1991). It is estimated that juvenile justice facilities are three to five times more likely to have youth with emotional disabilities than public schools (Leone & Meisel, 1997).

Arguably, the greater number of youth with emotional disabilities in the juvenile justice system is the result of the school-to-prison pipeline effect caused by zero tolerance policies. These studies support the "school-to-prison pipeline" theory which posits that zero tolerance policies increase dropout rates, leading to higher rates of arrest for this population (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Racial and Ethnic Disparity

Minority youth are disproportionately suspended and referred to court on school-related offenses. Black students are 2.6 times as likely to be suspended as White students (Wald & Losen, 2003). For example, in 2000, Black students represented 17% of the student population yet represented 34% of the suspended population (Wald & Losen, 2003). According to the Zero Tolerance Task Force of the American Psychological Association, there is no evidence connecting the disparity to poverty or assumptions that youth of color are prone to disruptive and violent behavior (Skiba et al., 2006). On the contrary, studies indicate that overrepresentation of Black students is related to referral bias on the part of school officials (Skiba, 2000).

This disproportionate minority suspension is related to the racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system, thereby lending additional support to the "school-to-prison pipeline" argument; that is, removing students from positive learning environments and criminalizing normative immaturity increases the risk of incarceration (Skiba, 2000). For example, in 1998 Black youths with no prior criminal history were six times, and Latino youths three times, more likely to be incarcerated than White youths for the same offenses (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2000). Although youth of color make up one-third of the adolescent population, they represent two-thirds of all the youth detained in secure facilities (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2000).

Another evidence in support of the "school-to-prison pipeline" effect is the considerable number of adult inmates that have not graduated high school. In 1997, 68% of state prisoners had not graduated (Sentencing Project, 1997). One study found that suspension and expulsion is the most significant contributing factor for subsequent arrest among adolescent females (American Bar Association & The National Bar Association, 2000).

Adolescent Brain Research

The most pressing reason that zero tolerance policies are not an effective means of modifying disruptive behavior is that it disregards all adolescent brain development research. Zero tolerance strategies ignore the unrefined skills associated with an adolescent's developmental capacity to manage emotions and conflicts. Recent adolescent brain research using

magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) found that the frontal lobe of the brain, which filters emotion into logical response, is not fully developed until about age 21 (Giedd et al., 1999). Youth generally rely on parts of the brain that generate emotions because the frontal lobe is not developed. As described by medical researcher Dr. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd of Harvard Medical School, “one of the things that teenagers seem to do is to respond more strongly with gut response than they do with evaluating the consequences of what they’re doing” (American Bar Association, Juvenile Justice Center, 2004). Youth are biologically wired to exhibit risk-taking behaviors, impulsive responses, and exercise poor judgment.

The implications of these MRI studies are relevant to how punishment should be applied in secondary schools as well as what should be done to improve the social, emotional, and academic outcomes for the youth. A zero tolerance policy that results in the suspension and/or arrest of students for behavior that is neurologically normative at this age can exacerbate the existing challenges facing the youth. Their developmental immaturity strongly implies that youth are still in a cognitive structuring stage. Youth are under neurological construction, and should be surrounded by positive adults, peers, and institutions to enable them to become responsible adults (Giedd et al., 1999). Dr. Jay N. Giedd, a brain imaging scientist, described the importance of how adults should manage the youth stating, “You are hard-wiring your brain in adolescence. Do you want to hard-wire it for sports and playing music and doing mathematics—or for lying on the couch in front of the television?” (Weinberger, Elvevag, & Giedd, 2005).

Schools are positive institutions found to be a protective buffer against negative influences (U.S. Surgeon General, 2001). Zero tolerance policies that remove students who do not pose a serious threat to safety may very well be increasing the risk of negative outcomes for the student, school, and the community.

Methodology: the Systems Model

The common definition of a system is “a set of interacting components, acting interdependently and sharing a common boundary separating the set of components from its environment” (Bozeman, 1979). As shown in Appendix Figure 1, the systems model employed to analyze organizations includes *inputs* in the form of demands and supports from the environment, and *outputs* in the form of services or products generated internally by the organization back into the environment. Although there are a variety of techniques to analyze systems, the Linear Programming Model (LPM) is a good beginning toward understanding the juvenile justice system because it seeks to determine the desired outcomes by identifying the best available resources. Conceptually, the LPM finds “those values of x , the variables that maximize

the linear objective z while simultaneously satisfying the imposed linear constraints and the nonnegativity constraints” (Bozeman, 1979). For example, the goal of any system is to identify a desired outcome (i.e., outputs as shown in Appendix Figure 1) and improve or enhance the outcome. LPM engages systems on how to achieve their desired outcome by identifying supports to the system while simultaneously recognizing constraints that work against the acquisition of the desired outcome. Once identified, the system should develop strategies to increase the supports and decrease the constraints.

Redefining Juvenile Justice System

Upon application of this model to the juvenile justice system, it becomes clear from the start that the term “juvenile justice system,” if the term is intended as a system designed to achieve a desired outcome, does not have a “common boundary” as described in the definition of a system. Historically, juvenile justice systems have been defined as the juvenile court or a single bureaucracy commonly called a department of juvenile justice. Using a systems model, specifically LPM, a true definition of a juvenile justice system is much broader and encompasses multiple systems that must work in unison if the desired outcome is to be achieved.

For example, the desired outcome of a juvenile justice system is the reduction in recidivism. As discussed previously, the research shows that reducing recidivism requires the targeting of high-risk offenders and identifying their criminogenic or crime-producing needs using assessment tools and matching them with effective treatment modalities. These crime-producing needs, factors that promote antisocial behavior, include lack of nurturing and supervision at home (family), poor performance in school (education), lack of pro-social activities (recreation), substance abuse, antisocial cognition (attitudes, values, and beliefs), and antisocial associates (friends) (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006). The problem is that each of these factors, in order to be effectively addressed, are linked to different organizations within the larger public system; that is, organizations with their own “set of interacting components, acting interdependently and sharing a common boundary separating the set of components from its environment.” Simply stated, these independent organizations, including social services, mental health, school system, juvenile court, and juvenile justice agency, operate in silos under separate budgets, policies, and operating procedures which together operate as a constraint. From a systems theory perspective, the problem is not only the “disconnect” in communication, but also the complex system with multiple points of entry with no clear exit (Buckley, 1967; Teske & Huff, 2010). Needless to say, a complex, disconnected system is inefficient, and worse, mystifying to youth and families having to navigate this “non-system” (Teske & Huff, 2010).

The Multi-Integrated Systems Theory, as shown in Appendix Figure 2, assumes that any desired outcome may be dependent on services provided by multiple organizations as opposed to a single entity. This is determined by assessing the desired outcome to find what variables are necessary to maximize the outcome using an LPM. If achieving the desired outcome is dependent on multiple systems, it becomes necessary to connect those systems using an integrated approach.

The Judicial Leadership Approach

Although various mechanisms may be employed to integrate multiple systems, Clayton County utilized the judicial leadership approach to bring relevant stakeholders together to develop written Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) or protocols. Judicial leadership is the key within a juvenile justice system because the juvenile court is the common denominator of all child service agencies. The intersection of juvenile justice is the juvenile court, and the juvenile judge is the traffic cop (Teske & Huff, 2010). Of all stakeholders, juvenile judges possess the greatest influence, and it is hurtful to children in a disconnected system when judges fail to use that influence to connect the independent silos. As pointed out by former National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges president Judge Leonard P. Edwards (1992), "This may be the most untraditional role for the juvenile court judge, but it may be the most important."

The key to winning the battle against this ineffective non-system is engaging the stakeholders to change the system to ensure needs assessments are conducted, to ensure delivery of a comprehensive continuum of care, and to fill gaps in service delivery. However, system change through collaboration requires written protocols to guarantee compliance and sustainability. Facilitating key stakeholders to develop protocols is the final role of the judge in creating an effective system of care for the youth.

The Collaborative Approach in Clayton County

Beginning in 2003, the juvenile judge in Clayton County brought stakeholders together to develop protocols to reverse the negative trends of zero tolerance policies. The research discussed previously, showing the correlation between suspensions, expulsions, and arrests and an increase in drop-out and recidivist rates, served as the blueprint for system integration using MOUs. For example, because the use of suspensions and arrests for minor infractions is associated with decreased graduation rates and increased juvenile crime, mechanisms were put in place to reduce suspensions and arrests and consequently keep students in school. Additionally, the mechanisms included appropriate assessment and treatment alternatives to address the disruptive behavior.

The stakeholders included the school superintendent, chief of police, directors of mental health and social services, and a community volunteer. The judge appointed a neutral person from outside the county to facilitate the discussion. The judge served in a limited capacity as the convener of the meetings. Initially, the group's goal was to reduce referrals from all schools in Clayton County to the juvenile court, affecting approximately 52,000 students. As the meetings progressed, the discussion on how to reduce school referrals generated more questions. What are school administrators to do with these disruptive students no longer referred to the court? When should police intervene in school disruption matters? How do we identify the underlying problems causing the disruption? What do we do to address those problems given the limited capacity and resources of the schools? How do we ensure the safety of the schools? The collaborative process generated new and difficult questions that extended the time to develop a system to meet the goal. The judge convened the meetings at least twice a month, with the facilitator assigning tasks to each member between meetings. The process to develop a system for reducing referrals to the juvenile court took 9 months. Following cross-training of police, school administrators and other relevant personnel, mental health and social service providers, and court personnel, the newly developed system was implemented at the beginning of the 2004–2005 academic year.

The stakeholders agreed that two MOUs were required to accomplish a reduction in suspensions and arrests while simultaneously securing alternative treatment measures. The first MOU, titled the "School Reduction Referral Protocol," called for the reduction in the arrests of students for certain misdemeanor offenses using a three-tier process. The student and parent received a warning on the first offense, a referral to a conflict resolution workshop on the second offense, and referral to the court on the third offense. The second MOU created a multidisciplinary panel to serve as a single point of entry for all child service agencies, including schools, when referring children, youth, and families at risk for petition to the court. The panel, called the Clayton County Collaborative Child Study Team (Quad C-ST), meets regularly to assess the needs of students at risk for court referral and recommends an integrated services action plan to address the students' disruptive behavior. The panel consists of a mental health professional, the student's school social worker and counselor, a social services professional, juvenile court officer, approved child service providers, and is moderated by a trained facilitator provided by the court. The panel linked the child and family to services in the community not available to the school system. The panel developed an array of evidence-based treatment programs such as functional family therapy, multisystemic therapy, cognitive behavioral programming, wrap-around services, and more. These professionals avoided the "overlapping" effect by targeting the mechanism to fund

treatment, whether it may be a youth entitled to benefits from Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or another source (Teske & Huff, 2010). Before, stakeholders would refuse assistance, arguing that the youth is not their responsibility because they did not fit into a narrowly defined pigeonhole for services.

Results

The findings of the studies highlighted in the literature review showing the negative effects of zero tolerance policies are also reflected in the data collected in Clayton County, GA. The data were collected using the Juvenile Court Automated Tracking System (JCATS). Data were entered into JCATS on each referral received from the school police, including the nature of the offense, the school, grade level, race, sex, and gender.

After police were placed on middle and high school campuses in the mid-1990s, the number of referrals to the juvenile court increased approximately 1,248% by 2004. Most of the referrals were misdemeanor offenses involving school fights, disorderly conduct, and disrupting public school, which are infractions previously handled in school with school disciplinary measures. At the same time, the more serious felony offenses did not increase.

During these same years, the OSS numbers increased (Clayton County Public School System, 2010). As these numbers increased, the graduation rates decreased to 58% by 2003 (Clayton County Public School System, 2010).

Altogether, one-third of all delinquent referrals to the court were from the school system, and most were minor offenses (Clayton County Juvenile Court, 2010). These referrals contributed to an increase in probation caseloads averaging approximately 150 probationers per caseloads. The majority of the caseloads involved minor offenses and consisted of kids not considered a high risk to re-offend or a public safety risk. Consequently, the high-risk and serious offenders were not adequately supervised because of the overwhelming number of probationers. In other words, resources were wasted on the youth who made us mad instead of concentrated on the youth who scared us. This resulted in high recidivist rates that compromised community safety.

By 2003, with referrals, probation caseloads, and recidivist rates increasing, and graduation rates decreasing, the system was under stress. It was time to evaluate how the system should respond to disruptive students in light of the research indicating that punishment alone, whether by suspension, expulsion, or arrest, exacerbates the problem for the students, schools, and the community. These findings demonstrate the importance of a dualistic approach in integrating community systems to reduce reliance on punitive measures while at the same time providing additional resources for school systems to assess and treat disruptive students. As shown in Appendix

Figure 3, following the School Referral Reduction Protocol, referrals to the court were reduced by 67.4%. By distinguishing felonies and misdemeanors, we see that the school police spent most of their time arresting students for low-level offenses. The implementation of the protocol produced a residual effect in the felony referral rate with a decrease of 30.8%. According to school police, the warning system was used for some felony offenses involving typical adolescent behavior. The decision by school police over time to extend their discretion to use the warning for certain offenses outside the scope of the protocol indicates a shift in cognition; that is, an understanding that discipline should be applied on a case-by-case basis. This resulted in greater reductions in referrals.

After the protocol was implemented, the number of students detained on school offenses was reduced by 86%. The number of youth of color referred to the court on school offenses was reduced by 43%.

Another by-product of the protocol was a reduction in serious weapons on campus by 73%. These involve weapons outside the discretion of police and must be referred to the court by law. At the same time, the School Referral Reduction Protocol went into effect; the Quad C-ST began work to develop alternatives to OSS and connect the school system with other community providers. These alternatives resulted in an 8% decrease in middle school OSS (Clayton County Public School System, 2010).

After implementing these integrated systems, the school system observed a gradual increase in graduation rates, resulting in a 20% increase by the end of the 2009 school year, which surpassed the statewide average. By 2004, the juvenile felony rate in Clayton County reached an all-time high, but declined 51% after creating the integrated systems.

Discussion: Implications for Mental Health Professionals

The results support the research that overuse of suspension and court referrals decreases graduation rates and is counterproductive in promoting school and community safety. The results also support the research that chronically disruptive students should be assessed to determine the underlying causes of the disruptive behavior, and services provided to address the causes. The problem to date has been how to make this happen for school systems that are not equipped to conduct mental health assessments and provide mental health and other services. The results support a multi-integrated systems approach that creates a single point of entry in which schools may refer difficult students for assessment and treatment by appropriate providers. This allows schools to rely more on assessment and treatment instead of the traditional punishment approach which is ineffective if used alone to modify behavior among students with chronic disruptive behavior.

The results appear to refute the notion that zero tolerance policies promote school safety. On the contrary, the results reflect an increase in school safety with the decrease in weapons on school campus. A survey of school police to explain the significant decrease in weapons on campus indicated that the protocol, by significantly reducing the arrest rate, increased the presence of police on campus. This increased presence promoted a friendly engagement with students on campus, which was bolstered by the students' change in perception of the police because they made fewer arrests. Consequently, police state that students share information that leads to solving crimes as well as crimes about to occur on campus. "Schools are a microcosm of the community" as stated by the supervisor of the school police unit (Richards, 2009). If one wants to know what is going on in the community, talk to the students. However, the students must want to talk to you. Therefore, the aim of school policing is to gather intelligence of student activity through student engagement.

The results suggest that graduation rates may be connected to serious juvenile crime in the community. Arguably, it could be posited that more students graduating from high school would lead to a reduction in the juvenile crime rate.

The implications for mental health professionals working with adolescents to improve their school performance begin with an understanding that mental health professionals are at a disadvantage because of the inherent limitations of school systems to appropriately address those student behaviors that diminish the opportunity to graduate. Based on the case study of the Clayton County Public School System, which appears to mirror most school systems in the country, the lack of resources to assess and provide treatment for chronically disruptive students creates a greater demand for punishers in the form of suspensions, expulsions, and arrests. Thus, zero tolerance policies become the primary approach to address disruptive behavior absent other viable alternatives. Unfortunately, this approach avoids connecting students with services to change behavior and instead, through suspensions and arrests, oftentimes places students in settings that exacerbate the behavior, and further diminishes their chance to succeed.

Realizing that zero tolerance policies are a by-product of a multisystems failure, it would be contradictory to think that a mental health system will work in isolation to correct the problem. In that knowledge, this singular service provider failure becomes more apparent in families of poverty given their limitations to navigate the systems of care in their respective community. A study of families in poverty indicated that mental health service delivery "must be multifaceted with agency cooperation and collaboration as well as multidisciplinary teams" (Dashiff, DiMicco, Myers, & Shepard, 2009). Another reason is that the types of effective programs that promote pro-social behavior are best delivered in the home and school and not the sterile environment of a

mental health office setting. For example, some effective approaches include communication skills, conflict resolution, social skills development, positive behavior reinforcement, engagement of parents, and school-based family therapy (Bruns, Moore, Stephan, Pruitt, & West, 2005).

This study further implies that no single system can adequately address disruptive behavior in the school setting. Although approximately 75% of all mental health service contacts occur in the schools, one study indicated that direct mental health service delivery in the school setting did not impact suspension rates (Bruns et al., 2005). The study did suggest that such delivery was difficult absent school policies to provide for alternatives to suspension. It is difficult to deliver treatment if the student is repeatedly suspended and/or arrested, causing disruption in service delivery. This implies, as does the study of Clayton County, that other systems such as social services, school police, prosecutors, and juvenile justice should be involved to help develop alternatives to suspensions and arrests.

Finally, and probably the most important implication, is the multisystems integration approach that employs a single point of entry to allow school systems to immediately access interventions to address the underlying causes of disruptive behavior. As this case study reveals, the multiple systems involved with adolescents, when brought together on a regular basis, guided by a written protocol with clear objectives, will enhance the effectiveness of mental health and other professionals while promoting a student's academic performance.

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Appendix

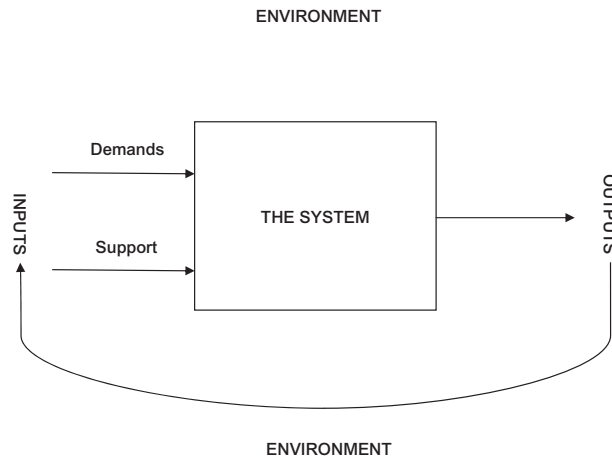


Figure 1. The Systems Model (Adapted From Easton, 1957)

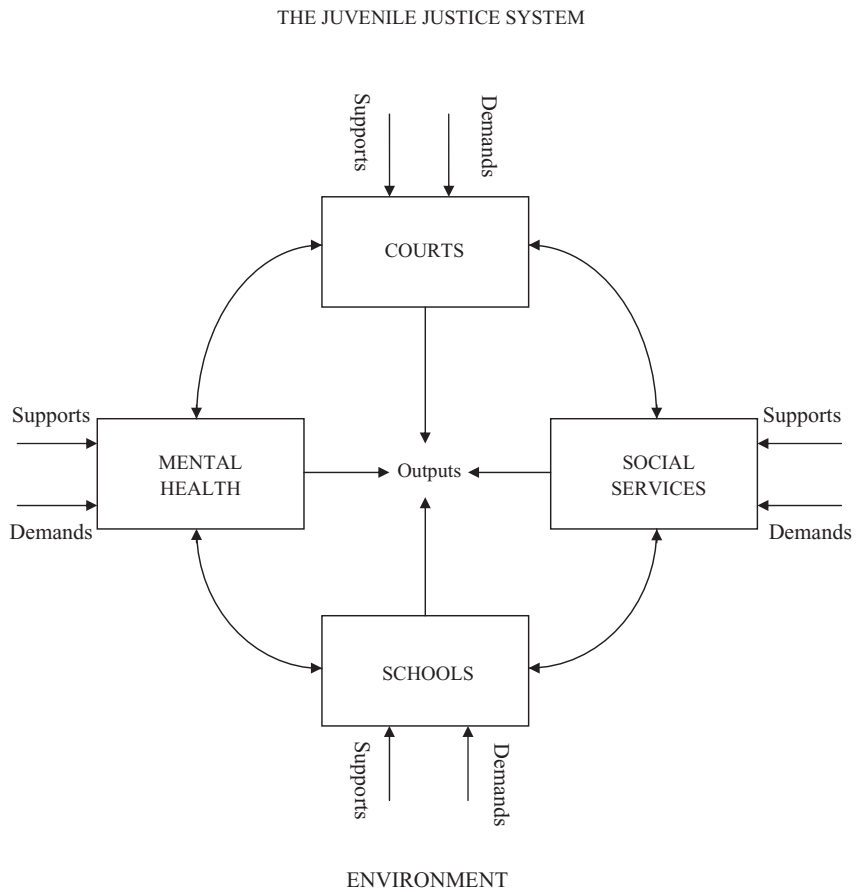


Figure 2. The Multi-Integrated Systems Model (Adapted From the Systems Model as Shown in Figure 1)

A desired output that is dependent on outputs from multiple systems must be integrated or connected as shown by the arrows to achieve the output.

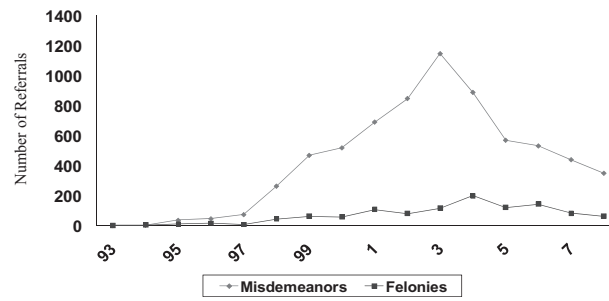


Figure 3. Line Graph Showing the Increase in Referrals After Police Were Placed on Campus and the Decrease After the Protocol Became Effective in 2004