

Forum looks for solutions to zero-tolerance policies

Dallas Morning News, The (TX) - April 25, 2010

- Author/Byline: KIM HORNER
- Edition: EDITION1
- Section: EAST METRO
- Page: B01

North Texas schools continue to unfairly punish children under zero-tolerance disciplinary policies despite changes in state law that took effect last fall, according to experts at a community forum on the issue Saturday. About 40 people attended the first Symposium on Zero Tolerance at the African American Museum in Fair Park. More symposiums on the subject are planned, though no dates have been set. Organizers aim to draft a plan with solutions to circulate among local community, religious and political leaders before school begins next year. "No one you'll hear from today is going to say that schools should not be safe places and that teachers should not be able to teach in a safe classroom with respect and appropriate discipline," said Timothy Bray, director of the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas and an organizer of Saturday's event. "The question is, do we have the right tools? Are we sitting in a good enough spot, or can we do better?" Several speakers at the event said the policies are too severe, ineffective and disproportionately harsh on students who are poor, disabled or minorities. They raised concerns that children as young as 3 are being punished and even expelled. "These are the kids who are ejected from school for giving someone an aspirin or bringing a plastic knife or bringing a camping knife," Bray said. A state law that took effect in September allowed districts to consider such factors as self-defense, intent, disciplinary histories and disabilities before applying zero-tolerance policies. One of the biggest concerns was that the policies often leave parents out of the process, with children sometimes questioned and cited by police before their parents are called. "Once they have a citation and they have to go to court, it's a different ballgame for the child," Community Court Judge Cheryl Williams said. "It becomes the state prosecuting the child." Another concern was that punishments such as suspension often put the child further behind in school. Mavis Knight, a State Board of Education member representing the Dallas area, said schools should create academic plans to ensure that the students can keep up with their schoolwork. She also said schools should work more closely to determine whether any illnesses could play a role in a child's behavioral problems. Experts discussed several possible solutions, including getting parents more involved. "If you don't take an active part in your school, this is what you're going to get," said the Rev. Derrick Bowman, president of the Dallas chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. "If parents were doing what they're supposed to be doing, we wouldn't be talking about zero tolerance." But boosting parent participation at schools may not be easy. Keith Wilkerson, chief of police for the Lancaster Independent School District, said few parents typically show up for the district's PTA meetings. He also said that many parents opt to pay fines rather than take parenting classes to get out of tickets. Williams said she has gone so far as to order some mothers and fathers to take parenting classes. "Sometimes you have to force a parent to be involved with their child, unfortunately," she said. Bernadette Nutall, a Dallas Independent School District trustee who attended the meeting, said that while schools must be safe, disciplinary policies should be fair and consistent. "It's going to take all of us to make the public schools what they need to be," she said.

- Caption: PHOTO(S): (MONA REEDER/Staff Photographer) Cheryl Williams, a community court judge, said it's a different ballgame for children who are cited by police.

• Index terms: EDUCATION

• Record: 13968587

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