

# Slow down your

# SANCTIONS



Zero tolerance has no place in the classroom, argues **Paul Dix**. It's the fast track to exclusion which does little, if anything, to support children or modify their behaviour...

**Z**ero tolerance is a horrible expression based on a flawed model created for political gain in New York during the 1990s (see *Freakanomics*). I get the idea that consistency works, that when we stand together we can create profound change, that we all read from the same song sheet. The trouble is that when people see the words 'zero tolerance' they read 'unlimited sanctions'. Punishment increases disproportionately, exclusions rise and the moaning brigade at the back of the staff room

feel satisfied that sanctions will change behaviour for the better. The truth is that teachers who struggle to manage behaviour often need to learn more tolerance, not zero tolerance.

Before the posturing politicians and the 'beat the damaged children' brigade get taken seriously, let me shout it from the rooftops: "You can't sanction human beings into behaving the way that you want them to if you want them to take responsibility for their behaviour." There are times when I feel that we are going around in circles. How many times will we witness union conferences where parents are blamed, ridiculous pronouncements about 'tough discipline', newspaper articles advocating beating other people's children and direct attacks on feral/evil/dangerous children? Did I fall asleep and land back into the middle of the 1980s?

Reducing exclusion is not about grand gestures or importing cleverly packaged systems. It starts with the deceleration of sanctions at the class level. If the ferocity of sanctions increase in proportion to a teacher's rising

frustration, then yelling 'Get out!' is the inevitable consequence. The interpersonal skills that slow down an argument, reduce protracted negotiation and resist confrontation also reduce class, and in turn school, exclusion. The same child who is fast-tracked to the head's office in one school can still be in the classroom, succeeding and coping, in another.

### Be sparing with sanctions

Stepped, progressive sanctions can be an effective tool if they are coupled with emotional patience. Yet it is the more subtle early interventions that stop children even before they climb the sanctions

ladder: the gentle adapting of the seating plan; the diversionary responsibility; the genuinely enthusiastic welcome at the start of the day; the subtle pairing with an extremely tolerant older child. It's the stuff that is so difficult to see when you observe great teachers teaching. Great teachers working in the most difficult environments

with children exhibiting the most demanding additional needs don't talk about 'zero tolerance'. They are some of the most tolerant people I have ever met. They refuse to give up on any of their children. They don't talk about systems or magic bullets. 'Zero tolerance' is for the politicians, the snake oil merchants, the armchair critics and the charlatans. If you want to reduce exclusions and improve

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behaviour at the same time then don't look to politicians with a background in economics or to journalists who rely on provocation to earn their living. Look to the schools and classrooms where the best practice is already proven.

As tolerance fades, sanctions increase and exclusions begin to rise. Children who were previously tolerated are told by the school community that they are not wanted. They are told that they do not fit and are passed around until they meet the tolerant mentors

that can save them. What a terrible lesson to teach young children, what a terrible reflection on our own ability to demonstrate emotional patience and intelligence. 'We can't deal with you, find someone else who can'. You could understand it from an independent school. Money buys choice. In state education it seems immoral to exclude children from the community that we spent years persuading them would care for and

protect them. We see the impact and social costs of exclusion all around us. It seems that the earlier we exclude, the greater the cost to the child and to the public purse. Some schools act as if they have the right to choose their children. They demonstrate a breathtaking arrogance. Zero tolerance can easily become absolute selfishness.

### Alternatives to exclusion

We can learn a great deal about managing the most extreme behaviour by looking at the home. When a child behaves appallingly at home he or she is chastised, sent to bed, perhaps sat on the step. There is time to think reparation and then payback. The sanction is swift and it is the conversation that seeks to change behaviour. The parent cannot 'exclude' or 'isolate' the child for more than a few hours. They are forced to help repair the damage. It cannot be delegated to someone else. The child cannot simply be removed. Why should the adult model in school be any different?

With the changes going through Parliament, schools will no longer be able to despatch responsibility for the children who don't fit in. Their attendance and educational performance will remain the responsibility of individual schools. Alternative provision will be funded from existing school budgets.

The most productive part of short term exclusion is the reintegration meeting with the parents or guardian. It is in this meeting that the most encouraging undertakings are made. Reparation is made and clean sheets are created. In many homes, the exclusion itself simply gives the child time to build up resentment whilst watching daytime TV for three days. Surely it's better to take the exclusion away and replace the time spent at home with Community Payback? Not litter picking and purely punitive tasks, but additional responsibilities executed in the child's own time. By attaching strong mentors to the

## Keep your cool

### 10 REASONS NOT TO SEND THEM STRAIGHT OUT...

- 1 If you stray from the agreed hierarchy of sanctions you are showing the children that you are inconsistent; you have broken your agreement with the class.
- 2 Going for the highest sanction straight away leaves no further room for manoeuvre.
- 3 The child may react defensively – answering back, confronting, protesting publicly.
- 4 Colleagues find it difficult to gauge when you need support and when you are simply sending children out through frustration.
- 5 You allow the class to see your emotional reactions over your rational choices.
- 6 You are encouraging parents and senior staff to question your management of behaviour.
- 7 By sending children out you only relieve your frustration temporarily.
- 8 Other children will see your inconsistency and may protest or react against it.
- 9 For children who are often sent out without moving through the sanction steps, being excluded becomes an expected outcome.
- 10 Your behaviour management agreement with the class is trampled on. Trust is broken.



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payback scheme you can find the time to build relationships that change behaviour for the long term. Pair the community payback with a formal 'exclusion style' meeting and you get the consequences that are deserved with the meeting that matters and a chance for the child to learn a different way of behaving.

What if we simply took exclusion away? What if we said that the children who come to the school are the children that we have to find a way to succeed with? That there was no chance of changing them around, getting rid of the tricky ones and importing lovely ones. What if we simply accepted that all children have additional needs, stopped labelling them as 'special' and became accepting of every card in our pack? If sanctions and exclusion solved behaviour we would not still be talking about it. Only when we learn absolute tolerance will we stop going through the same old arguments.

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