

SENT DOWN THE DRAIN

ZERO TOLERANCE & THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

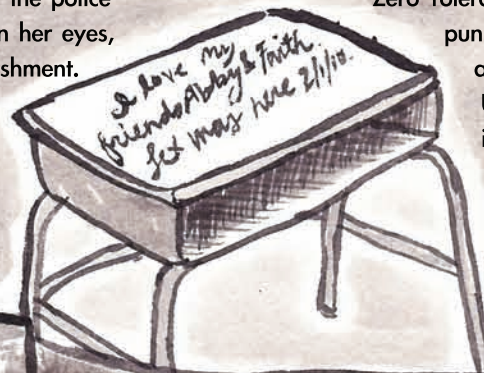
Alexa Gonzales, a 12 year-old student at Forest Hills Junior High, New York, was arrested in front of her fellow students in February, 2010. Alexa, an outgoing and artistic student, found herself face to face with a police officer after breaking a school rule... she wrote on her desk!



It seems that doodling the words "I love my friends Abby and Faith. Lex was here 2/1/10" was considered a threatening and criminal act by the school principal, who immediately called the cops.

She was escorted to the police precinct with tears in her eyes, shocked at this punishment.

Why was Alexa arrested for drawing on her desk? She was punished under a "Zero Tolerance" policy.



"Zero Tolerance", a practice of strict automatic punishment for rule-breaking, has been adopted by school districts all over the U.S.A. Although these policies are implemented with the supposed goal of creating "safer" & more "peaceful" schools, they have done more to criminalize youth than they have to protect them. "Zero Tolerance" policies create school environments in which young people can easily be pushed out of schools and into prisons for minor non-violent offenses.



A few examples... students have been harshly punished for bringing butter knives to school (a violation of "weapons" rules), for sharing cough drops with fellow students (a violation of "drug" laws), and for simply forgetting to wear a belt to school (violation of dress code). Although "Zero Tolerance" policies have not proven to reduce violent crime in schools, they have been shown to unfairly target poor people of color.

Schools are meant to be places for learning. Education refers to the practice and process of acquiring knowledge, and developing powers of reasoning and judgement. "Zero Tolerance" policies, by definition, require an automatic punishment for the breaking of a rule. Young people, however, deserve a learning environment in which figures of authority are able to see the complexity of behaviors and actions.



When a school rule is broken, it is not usually necessary to involve police. Often, both students and teachers can grow while attempting to understand and resolve conflicts. A culture of safety and peace within a school cannot be built upon the foundations of unfair punishment and fear. Safety and peace take root when they grow from a culture of respect, understanding, and tolerance.

