A zero tolerance policy in school punishes any infraction of a rule, regardless of the circumstances. Such policies were instituted to crack down on weapons, drugs, and violence, but they have led to a record number of suspensions and expulsions for marginal offenses. Now some schools are starting to question whether zero-tolerance has gone too far.
Transcript

Rethinking Zero Tolerance Policies at Schools

LESTER HOLT, anchor:

In our EDUCATION NATION series tonight, schools rethinking zero tolerance. The policies were meant to crackdown on weapons, drugs and violence, but they've also led to record numbers of suspensions and expulsions for marginal offenses. Now some schools are questioning whether zero tolerance has gone too far. NBC's Kate Snow reports on our EDUCATION NATION.

KATE SNOW reporting:

The policies were born of the best intentions, to prevent tragedies like Columbine. Bring a weapon to school, you're suspended, simple as that. But that approach has led to controversial decisions. A first-grader was suspended after bringing a camping utensil with a knife to a Delaware school cafeteria. After a public outcry, the school let him come back. Hayley Russell missed seven weeks of classes after school officials found prescription acne medication in her locker. The Fairfax County, Virginia, school district doesn't call it zero tolerance, but its policy strictly follows state law, which treats prescription drugs as a controlled substance.

Ms. HAYLEY RUSSELL: It was an accident. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone.

Ms. JUDITH KAFKA (Baruch College School of Public Affairs): I think there's a real tension right now. There's still other zero tolerance policies in place in every state and in every district, but it's not really benefiting either the children who are suspended and expelled or the children left behind.

SNOW: In North Carolina, a bill moving through the legislature right now would give more flexibility to school districts.

Ms. JUNE ATKINSON (North Carolina Public Schools Superintendent): I believe that it is time for the pendulum to move to a place where we can use more common sense in determining what is best for our
students.
Group of Students: (In unison) ...with liberty and justice for all.

SNOW: At Alexandria city schools in Virginia, they're expanding a program that teaches social skills, intervenes when there are problems, and rewards positive behavior with tokens.

Ms. KIMBERLY ALVAREZ (Ninth Grade Student): You just you them to, like, either go to the dance, get ice cream, just random stuff like that.

SNOW: How big a deal is that dance on Friday?
Ms. ALVAREZ: Oh, it's good.

SNOW: Students here are still severely punished for bringing weapons or drugs to school, for example. That is the state law in Virginia. But the idea at this school is to prevent situations like that from happening in the first place.

Mr. LAWRENCE JOINTER (Alexandria City Public Schools): If it works, we're going to be doing the job that I think all schools ought to be doing, and that's making a great effort in keeping kids in school.

SNOW: In neighboring Fairfax County, Virginia, the school board is voting tonight on new proposals that would prevent the kind of lengthy disciplinary process that Hayley Russell endured. Hayley says she lost most of her friends and her grades suffered.
Ms. RUSSELL: No one should have to go through that.

Unidentified Woman: So you're going to get...

SNOW: A situation many communities are now trying to avoid by rethinking the rules. Kate Snow, NBC News, Alexandria, Virginia.