# AFRICAN AMERICAN DELIQUENT YOUTH: OVERCOMING ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICIES AND FINDING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Wesley C. Long, Ph.D., University of Oklahoma
Shannon S.C. Bert, Ph.D., University of Oklahoma

**ABSTRACT**

A critical need exists for research on high school failure, dropping out, and the relationship between these actions and zero-tolerance mandates. In this article, the authors summarize the findings of a qualitative case study among seven African American male high school students at-risk of school failure who refused enrollment in alternative education. Five themes emerged in explaining their persistence in successfully obtaining a traditional high school diploma. Using statements from a qualitative interview, the article highlights the obstacles they faced and their determination to complete school in a traditional high school setting. A discussion will offer suggestions on how to successfully serve these particular students, as well as ways to advocate and support their educational needs and decisions.

## INTRODUCTION

Zero-tolerance is but one component of federal school violence prevention initiatives that were developed in the 1990s. From these federal initiatives, policies were developed and implemented to severely punish students for a variety of behaviors deemed dangerous and/or in violation of school policies, particularly acts of gun violence (American Psychological Association 2008). However, since its inception, there has been an abundance of controversy surrounding the use of zero-tolerance practices within the American school system. On the one hand, zero-tolerance policies were implemented to provide fairness in addressing student misbehavior. In particular, zero-tolerance practices cover the gamut of student misbehavior, from addressing threats of violence to giving aspirin to a classmate. The practice is designed to be a one-size-fits-all solution to all the problems that schools confront. Heir and colleagues (2000) posited that zero-tolerance mandates have redefined students as criminals, with unfortunate consequences.

Conversely, both educators and parents have highlighted a major shortcoming of zero-tolerance policies as punishing minor student infractions in harsh manners that mimic the adult criminal justice system. More specifically, zero-tolerance results in student expulsions, suspensions, or even arrests, irrespective of any legitimate explanation (Robbins 2005). Theoretically, zero-tolerance is directed at students who misbehave intentionally, yet it also applies to those who misbehave as a result of emotional problems and/or other disabilities. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that zero-tolerance policies, while facially neutral, are having a disproportionate impact on minority students and those

who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Kim and Taylor 2008; Munoz 2004). May's (1999) examination of 10 American school districts concluded that, "Black students, already suspended or expelled at higher rates than their peers, will suffer the most under new zero-tolerance attitudes toward rising school violence" (Pp. 3). In essence, zero-tolerance means that students of color will be expelled and forced to receive alternative education at a faster rate than their non-minority counterparts (Kim and Taylor 2008).

**The Initiation and Implementation of Zero-Tolerance Mandates in America**

Zero-tolerance mandates were initiated in an effort to create safe schools following highly publicized youth-related school homicides in Denver, CO and Jonesboro, AR in the early 1990s. In response to these multiple episodes of youth violence, federal acts such as the *Safe Schools Act* of 1994 (PL 103-227) and the *Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act* of 1994 (PL 103-382) were implemented to provide funding for violence prevention programs as well as to initiate and implement peer mediation training and conflict resolution for public schools. The addition of the *Gun-Free Schools Zones Act* of 1990 (PL 101-647) and its expansion (PL 103-227) involved gun control policies at schools and more severe punishment (e.g., expulsion) for juvenile and delinquent offenders. Amendments to the *Gun-Free Schools Act* in 1995 and 1997 expanded the original intent of the legislation such that in 1995 the word *firearms* was replaced with *weapons*; this change in wording made it possible for schools to expel students for items that could be used as weapons such as nail clippers, files, and pocket knives (Schwartz and Riser 2001). In 1997, the act was amended to allow schools to expel students in possession of illegal drugs and/or drug paraphernalia.

In essence, these federal acts and zero-tolerance mandates represented American efforts to enforce school suspension and expulsion penalties for students caught possessing firearms; however, they were also meant to have a preventative component. An unfortunate outcome of zero-tolerance policies is that many school districts enforce zero-tolerance mandates by choosing to expel students versus implementing the preventive components of the policy such as by providing mediation, counseling, and conflict resolution services to those students deemed delinquent or violent. As a consequence, zero-tolerance policies have been the cause of a large number of students, particularly students of color, being expelled from traditional school settings thereby providing a need for alternative school settings to address their educational needs.

**Alternative Education and Zero-Tolerance Mandates**

An alternative school is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2002) as a "public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education"

(Pp. 55). Moreover, federal, state, and local guidelines require that specific types of expelled students, such as those who are on probation through the juvenile justice system, students receiving individualized educational plans (EIP's), and students with disabilities, are provided sufficient opportunities to continue their educational pursuits. During the 1990's, these requirements forced school districts to find ways to educate students who met these federal guidelines and who were also expelled from attending the traditional school setting (Bowditch 1993). The solution for many districts was to create or expand upon alternative programs to educate students who were both delinquent and displayed anti-social behaviors.

As such, alternative education programs throughout America expanded in response to the increased number of students being expelled from, or leaving, traditional school settings due to zero-tolerance infractions. The expanding of alternative education programs to include students who violated zero-tolerance mandates allowed districts to separate aggressive and delinquent youth from youth committing minor violations. Van Acker (2007) stated, "To ensure a safe school environment while continuing to provide quality education to students who display antisocial, violent, and aggressive behavior, some schools turned to alternative school programs where these at-risk and challenging students can be educated in a setting that is typically removed from the general education population" (Pp. 5). Thus, students expelled from school for committing zero-tolerance infractions were transferred to, or enrolled in, alternative school programs to complete their education.

*The use and effectiveness of alternative education.* The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2001) conducted the first national study of public alternative schools and programs serving students at risk for dropping out of formal education. The study found that 10,900 public alternative schools and programs for at-risk students served approximately 612,900 students in the United States during the 2000-2001 school year. Barr and Parrett's (2001) report mirrors that of the NCES, but also determined that if private educational schools were included, the projection of alternative schools and programs increased to an estimated 20,000 schools and programs. Of particular interest, NCES reported that alternative schools were located disproportionately in urban districts with high minority student populations and with high poverty concentrations; thereby making these specific school populations susceptible to social, political, economic, and educational inequalities.

Research has been divided on the effectiveness of alternative education, as well as the quality of education provided in alternative school settings (e.g., Powell 2003; Cox 1999; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, and Tonelson 2006). A major concern centers on the development, educational skill levels, and academic achievement of delinquent students in the alternative school setting (Martin, Martin, Gibson and Wilkins 2007; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2004). More specifically, a number of reports indicate that many delinquent youth fail in their educational pursuits by dropping out of school or by not completing the GED

courses due to educational deficiencies (Siennick and Staff 2008; Wang, Blomberg and Li 2005). Thus, the statement can be made that many students do not benefit from attending school in a non-traditional setting. In fact, being placed in an alternative school, as opposed to traditional school settings, may have a detrimental impact on students' ability to pursue and achieve receiving their high school diploma or equivalency.

**Present Study**

Many school districts across the United States have expanded their zero-tolerance policies for other purposes; actions of which have negatively affected minority and economically disadvantaged students and their pursuit of receiving a high school diploma or equivalency. A qualitative approach was used as a means of gaining a better understanding of the experiences of a specific group of delinquent African American youth who defied odds by demanding placement in a traditional high school setting and achieved academic success.

*Framing the current investigation*. The school district studied for the current article is the second largest in its Midwestern state serving over 35,000 students. The district's informal policy on students exiting detention centers who want to enroll in a district school provides three avenues for attending district-funded classes: (1) enroll directly into the district's school alternative education program; (2) enroll directly into a GED program sponsored and operated by the district; and/or (3) enroll in a modified class schedule that allows students to come to a district-operated traditional school two full or three half days a week. Seven of 23 students exiting detention centers in spring 2008 refused the school district's protocol, citing that the existing structure of the district's three options was not the best environment for them to complete their education or equivalency.

The school district administration and the director of alternative education were adamant in their stance that the seven students needed to be slowly transitioned back into the community and traditional school setting and that by allowing them to go directly to their home schools from the detention centers was setting them up for failure. The seven students, with support from their parents and their juvenile justice system team, felt that their behavior and grades during their detention warranted them being given an opportunity to prove themselves in a traditional school setting. As supported by the findings of Siennick and staff (2008), the youths, as well as those interested in their well-being, were concerned about their success in a non-traditional educational setting. During their placement hearing, the students were able to verbalize their desire to transition back into their home schools and receive their high school diplomas. With reservations and reluctance, the hearing committee approved their requests. At the closing of the hearing, the committee and alternative school director warned the students of the high failure rate of students exiting detention centers, inpatient substance abuse, and psychiatric programs and returning to the traditional school setting, pointing to the lack of support that they may require and resources that are provided in a standard school setting.

*Aims and objectives*. Despite the large number of economically

disadvantaged and minority students who have been removed from the traditional school setting based on zero-tolerance mandates, little research focuses on what happens to these youths once they are expelled. There is, however, a dearth of research focusing on programs or services that attempt to educate these students once they are expelled from the public educational system in an attempt to document what works and what does not. Unfortunately, research has shown that a number of these students leave the traditional school setting and never return to formal education (Munoz 2004). Furthermore, many school districts across America, including the one utilized in the current investigation, have made it difficult for these students to return to their home schools and resume their educational endeavors. The individual cases that are the subject of this article help fill the need for research on how to protect, advocate, and empower this vulnerable population.

Using a case study approach, specific concerns from the school district administration, as well as parents of the seven students, were used as framing questions for qualitative interviews and naturalistic observations. There were three guiding questions: (1) Can the seven students defy the odds and achieve success without transitioning from alternative education? (2) Why are these seven students defying protocol and standards set by the school district? (3) What is the motivation of these seven students in attaining a high school diploma in a standard school setting?

## METHOD

### Participants

In spring 2008, 23 students (14 African American, six Hispanic, and three Caucasian) in a specific Midwestern school district were released from detention centers, psychiatric hospitals, or drug treatment facilities and were to enroll in alternative education. Of the original 23 students, seven African American males appealed to the school district to overturn the requirement to enroll in alternative education and therefore were chosen for the current study. Participants ranged in age from 15-18 years and were in the 10$^{th}$ or higher grade of high school. All seven participants were residing in a state-run detention center for youths convicted of felony acts. Part of their probation/parole plan was to return to school and continue their educational pursuits. All seven came from urban, low-income communities. All returned to single-parent, female-headed households once leaving the detention center.

The lead author, the school district's alternative education director, and a representative from the counseling agency from which they were to receive their mandatory mental health services met with the participants to examine their academic levels. Six of the seven participants tested with reading and math scores at grade level or above. One was one grade lower in reading and two grades lower in math. Four of the seven had a father with a prison history, and five of seven had fathers with a history of drug abuse. Six of the seven had no relationship with their father, with four of the seven never having met their father. Of the seven mothers, two had

been to prison, three had struggled with a drug or alcohol addiction, six were living in Section 8 housing, five had been in a domestic violence relationship, six had a high school diploma, two had some college, and two had been married.

**Procedures**

Prior to participating in the study, informed consent for participation was obtained from the participants and their parent(s). Following the participants' spring 2008 successful appeal and district approval to enroll in their home schools, a member of the research team met with the participants and their probation officers at their assigned community counseling agency. The participants were required to meet once a week for individual therapy sessions, twice a month for family therapy, and twice a month for group counseling sessions. As a non-participant observer, the researcher was given permission to attend education-specific group counseling sessions, sit in on the participants' visits with their probation officers at the school, and shadow and follow up with school counselors to monitor the progress and compliance of the participants. Initially, the researcher met twice a month with the participants during the semester. After spring break, the researcher met once a month with the participants. The visits continued to be at the school, at the probation officers' offices, or at the community mental health center. The visits continued through summer 2009, which is when four of the seven participants graduated.

Prior to conducting individual interviews, the lead author met with participants in a group setting as a way for them to hear each other's views and opinions. All seven did not know each other and had only heard that there were others like themselves who refused to accept the district's policy on the treatment of those exiting private and state-run institutions. Since they were all on the same journey to oppose enrolling in an alternative school, it was of interest to observe collective discussions of their objections to alternative education, their confidence to appeal the school district's decision, and their views on education. The seven participants listened attentively to each other's reasons, explanations, and, more importantly to their feelings expressed behind the drives and purposes to request placement in a traditional school setting.

Interview items were selected based on the participants' abilities to verbalize the challenges and obstacles they faced in pursuit of a quality education, their determination to enroll in a traditional school setting, and their motivation for pursuing a high school diploma. During group and individual conversations, participants responded to the following questions: (1) Why were you so adamant against attending alternative schools? (2) Where did you get the strength and courage to appeal alternative school placement? (3) What was your parent's role in your decision to demand traditional school enrollment? Individual and group-based qualitative interviews were recorded and field notes were completed at the conclusion of each interview.

Following the group-based interview, the researcher spent hours socializing with participants and observing them in their home and school setting. Interviews were also conducted with teachers, probations

officers, and family members to gauge levels of commitment to academic achievement, and, secondarily, to assess the trustworthiness of the participants' accounts (Bogdan and Biklen 1998; Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson 2005). Field notes and audio tapes were transcribed and analyzed ethnographically so that emergent themes in participants' responses could be identified and categorized as appropriate. Name and other details reported in the current article are anonymous. The use of different data collection methods (interviews, observations, and field notes) and different sources of information (talking with multiple informants) allowed the researcher to triangulate data and look for evidence of regularities and irregularities in the interviews and data (Cresswell 1998).

## RESULTS

### Analyses

The primary goal of analyses was to establish conceptually related cluster matrices for interpretation (Miles and Huberman 1984). Such matrices provided a method of organizing data so that important themes emerged. Following the initial sorting, coding and memoing, many themes were identified. Determining the core themes, the researchers decided to "give priority to topics on which a substantial amount of data [were] collected and [for] which a recurrent or underlying pattern of activities in the setting under study" emerged (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:5). Five overarching themes materialized from the data either singularly or in combination: (1) Safety, (2) Anti-delinquency, (3) Pride, (4) Support, and (5) Motivation. The following paragraphs provide a brief description of each participant as a means of setting the foundation for more fully discussing the emergent themes. The life stories reflect statements made by the participants themselves, their parents, teachers, and parole officers. The latter sections discuss each major theme in detail; proving specific representative quotes from participants.

### Brief Biographies

*Marcus*: As a 16-year-old, African American male, Marcus resides with his mother and three siblings. His mother and father never married, and he has no relationship with his father. Marcus and his family have lived in low income housing since his birth. His mother graduated from high school and attended three semesters at a local junior college. Marcus reported that he was always a problem child at home and school. He recalls having had a number of encounters with the criminal justice system, starting with stealing at the age of ten. Marcus became involved in a gang when he was nine, following in the footsteps of an older cousin and had his first gun at 11-years-old. He was a chronic youth offender and was on probation at the age of 13 years following a drive-by shooting with his fellow gang members. Marcus was charged and sentenced in the juvenile court system and served 3½ years in a state-run detention center. An academic placement test while incarcerated showed that his reading and math skills were 1 grade above his grade level.

*Anthony*: An 18-year-old male who lives with his mother, grandmother, and 2 siblings. At 12 years old, while

serving nine months in an inpatient behavioral health facility, Anthony was diagnosed with conduct disorder and dysthymia. His aggressive, violent behavior followed him into his teen years. He admits to joining a gang at the age of nine and committing his first felony shortly after. He also admits to being a problem child and always being in trouble with his mother and the police. He has never met his father. Anthony is angry, defiant, and has very little regard for adults or authority and admits to only respecting his mother and grandmother. He was charged and convicted for assault, battery, and drug trafficking. Anthony was tested while incarcerated, with test scores showing he read at one grade lower than his grade level and performed math problems two grades lower.

*Terrance*: Terrance is a 17-year-old African American male who lives with his mother and three siblings. His mother and father are high school graduates. He has never met his father but knows that he is in prison and that at the time of his incarceration was addicted to crack cocaine. His mother works full-time as a cashier at a grocery super center, and the family lives in a federally subsidized home. Terrance was always considered a bright student throughout his elementary and middle school years, but that changed when he joined a gang. He started using and abusing alcohol and marijuana and becoming involved in criminal acts. Terrance was involved in a number of petty crimes during his pre-adolescent years, but his criminal behavior and aggression began to blossom during his teen age years. At 13, he and two friends were convicted of armed robbery. While incarcerated, he was tested and found to be one grade level higher in reading and at grade level in math.

*Andre*: A 16-year-old male, Andre lives with his mother and one sibling. His mother works part-time and is in a training program for persons receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). She hopes to be a medical assistant when she completes the program. Andre has very little interaction with his father and admits to not remembering him since he last saw him 11 years prior. His father has been in and out of prison and has a history of drug abuse. Andre has been in an inpatient mental health facility due to his aggressive, violent outbursts. He was diagnosed with conduct disorder and intermittent explosive disorder and was in an inpatient hospital for six months when he was 11 years old. Andre was unable to control his anger and temper, and because of this, he has found himself involved in violent confrontations with peers. Andre was sentenced when he was 14 years old for assault with a deadly weapon when he beat a neighborhood schoolmate repeatedly with a pipe. Andre was tested while incarcerated and found to be 1 grade level higher in math skills and at grade level in reading.

*Keeton*: A 15 year-old male, Keeton lives with his mother, aunt, two cousins, and two siblings. His aunt and her children have lived with Keeton's family for two years because the aunt lost her low-income housing due to allowing her boyfriend to sell drugs from her apartment. Keeton vaguely remembers meeting his father who moved to Georgia when he was three-years-old. Keeton is a shy, respectful, and a quiet young man whose naïveté has gotten him into

trouble throughout his short life. His mother works full-time at a local convenience store and receives government assistance for food, housing, and day care. She graduated and completed two years of college. Keeton is a follower and wants to be accepted by peers, which oftentimes causes him to act out to get attention. He admits to having low self-esteem and knows his behavior is counter to his upbringing. At 13, Keeton and three older friends stole a car at knifepoint, were caught, and sentenced. Keeton was unaware of the carjacking and was treated less severely than the others. He was tested while incarcerated and found to read and perform math problems two grade levels above his grade level.

*Jerome*: Jerome is a 16-year-old male. He lives with his mother and one sibling in a low-income apartment complex. His mother did not graduate from high school; she had Jerome during her sophomore year of high school. Sporadically, Jerome sees his father who lives in the same city and with whom he has a strained relationship due to a number of factors, most noticeably is his father's lack of child support and inconsistent relationship. His father has been in and out of prison, has battled drug and alcohol issues, and was physically abusive to his mother during their short marriage. His mother was imprisoned for a short time and also battled drug addiction but has been clean and sober for over three years. She works part-time at a national food chain and receives government assistance for food and housing. Jerome is a loner and has few friends but is loyal to the ones he has. He is not involved in a gang, but his closest friends are; and oftentimes they pull Jerome into their delinquent and criminal acts to assist them. Jerome prides himself on being smarter than most of his friends and family members. He is aware of his negative behavior before acting out and admits to choosing to engage in criminal activities. Explaining the reason for his delinquent behavior, Jerome said that he considered crime glamorous and fulfilling. He was charged and sentenced for breaking and entering and robbery. He was tested while incarcerated and found to read and perform math problems at grade level.

*Sean*: An 18-year-old male, Sean lives with his mother and four siblings in a low-income housing apartment complex. His mother and father were married for two years, but divorced due to domestic violence issues, substance abuse, and infidelity. Sean sees his father and his father's relatives at least monthly, if not more. His father is self-employed as a yard and handy man in the community. His mother is currently not working due to a workers' compensation lawsuit stemming from a fall she had at work that hurt her back. Sean's mother used drugs in her past and has a prison record. However, she says that she has found religion and has changed her life. She has always been supportive of Sean even when he was doing wrong. Sean was a problem student during his elementary and middle school years and was frequently suspended from school. Sean is a member of a gang and has a reputation of being aggressive and violent. He has carried a gun since the age of 11 and admits to using it on occasion. Sean admits to being proud of being feared and respected in the gang community and of carrying out a number of violent acts to build his

reputation. School was easy for him, and he did well. Sean was charged and sentenced for drug trafficking and carrying a concealed weapon. Sean was tested and found to have reading and math skills at grade level.

**Qualitative Themes**

The data has been grouped into five themes, with one emergent theme represented by two subthemes. Four of the five emergent themes resulted from group-based interviews which sought to examine participant's collective objections to alternative education, their confidence to appeal the school district's decision, and their views on education: (1) Safety, (2) Anti-delinquency, (3) Pride, and (4) Support. The individual interviews sought to explore the participants' commitment to obtaining a high school diploma and their overall views of education. Specific responses from both the individual and group-based interviews are reflected in the fifth theme referred to as Motivation. The Motivation theme consists of two subthemes: (a) motivation to change other's negative perceptions of themselves, and (b) motivation to obtain a diploma.

*Safety*. The Safety theme is characterized by the participant's unanimous concerns regarding exposure to rival gang members and the lack of protection they would receive while attending alternative school. For example, Anthony voiced his hesitancy in attending alternative school as:

> *"We have done some bad things to people, and they know our reputations and to put us in schools that can't protect you don't make sense. Almost everybody that came from the detention center goes to one of three alternative schools and the odds of you bumping into someone you had a problem with are certain."*

Jerome also voiced his safety concerns:

> *"The people that are there [alternative school] are the people that we were locked up with, and at the alternative school, the kind of protection needed don't exist. I think all of us are trying not to go back to any type of prison, and I think alternative schools force a lot of us back."*

Of particular concern is that several participants suggested that the district was aware of the problems that may arise when rival gang members are placed in the same vicinity and used each of the three alternative schools as "dumping grounds" for problem students in hopes of expelling them from school on a permanent basis. In particular, referring to school officials Marcus stated:

> *"I think the people at the school know that too. Why else would they put a whole lot of criminals and gang members together knowing we don't like each other? I know me and if I went there, I would be in trouble."*

Terrance admitted that he was motivated to return back to a traditional school setting so that he could "*learn without looking over my back so much and maybe meeting new people to kick it with.*" Terrance, and many others, was well aware of how safety fears would distract from his learning experience and even

sought to make new pro-social relationships with students in a traditional high school setting.

*Anti-delinquency.* The anti-delinquency theme reflects participants' desire to avoid engaging in delinquent acts upon being released from the detention center. Each of the seven participants acknowledged that placement in alternative education would inevitably result in them being expelled from school or even arrested as a result of attending school with other delinquent youth. Anthony mentioned:

> *"You know what will put you back behind wires and being surrounded daily by rival gang members and criminals will get you in trouble eventually...Maybe not today or tomorrow but soon enough it's going to happen."*

Andre added to the topic stating:

> *"I still have a temper, and being around people all day that you know don't like you don't sit well with me. When we leave mental hospitals or detention centers, we just want to be normal for a while...not thinking about going back to our old ways...Everybody I know who went to alternative school say the same thing. Man the same fools that got you locked up are at the school, and they don't care what you trying to do positive. They are trying to trip you up... Like these other brothers here, I just don't want to go back or get any new charges, and alternative education would have done that."*

<u>*Pride*</u>. The third emergent theme represents participant's spontaneous positive remarks regarding how they felt about themselves for requesting placement in traditional school settings and being granted this opportunity. Words such as "brave," "bold," and "courage" were used to describe themselves and their actions. For many, it was the first time they felt as though they had accomplished something that would have a positive impact on their lives. In explaining his pride Jerome recounted:

> *"We have never been in high school, and to go to the board and say we wanted to be treated fairly is a big deal...What we did was important I think...We were able to get our point across and they heard us... I am proud of what we did...For the first time, I did something right for me."*

The participants were aware that their past transgressions preceded them and did not give them credibility in requesting placement outside of an alternative educational setting. However, they were willing to take this risk because they felt as though they "*had nothing to lose*." For many, it was an opportunity to demonstrate they had, and even wanted, a voice in their education. For example, Keeton adamantly stated, *"I think we showed them that we ain't stupid, and we can speak up for ourselves."*

<u>*Support*</u>. The topic of support, or lack thereof, was a common theme discussed by participants. Since many of their fathers were not part of their lives, mothers and even grandmothers were the persons to whom the participants looked for support and guidance on their decision to request placement in a traditional school

setting. Unfortunately, the majority of participants reported that their mothers and family were against them fighting to enroll in their home schools upon being released from the detention center. Several mothers feared that by "*fighting the system*" their sons were causing more problems for themselves and preferred that they [their sons] accept placement in alternative school since at least they were allowed to receive some form of schooling. Upon being asked about how his mother felt about his decision to request placement in a traditional school setting, Marcus replied:

> *"My momma didn't say much. She thought I was making too big a deal over the school thing. She wanted me to go wherever they would let me go and be glad because they did not have to let me in anywhere. My momma didn't want to come to the hearing...She didn't know I was appealing until she got there. She said if she had known what I was doing, she wouldn't have shown up.*

What is also evident in this passage from Marcus is the fact that many mothers refused to attend the hearing; leaving their sons with no form of support during one of the most stressful and important times in their lives. For many, their sons did not deserve the opportunity to receive their education in a traditional high school setting. In particular, Keeton explained:

> *"My mom don't really care about too much when it comes to me. I have been the problem child since birth according to her...She said she didn't care if I dropped out or not and just stay out her way. She don't think I am going to do nothing and I am just talk...If I needed her, I don't think she would show up. After I told her I got into regular school, all she could say is you going to mess that up too. I hope to prove her wrong too."*

Where many mothers and families refused to support their sons, there were in fact two mothers that shared their sons' desire to seek placement outside of alternative school despite a lack of support from other family members. For these particular participants, gaining the support of their mothers, maybe for the first time, had a positive impact on their self-concept. Not only had they noticed a change in themselves, but their mothers also acknowledged their transformation and wanted what was best for them. These mothers voiced their concerns regarding their sons attending alternative school and even attended the hearing to display their support. Andre recounted the experience:

> *"My mother stood by me on this, maybe her first time doing that. I told her why I didn't want to go, and she said she would help. I was surprised because since I've been getting in trouble, she always sided against me. This time she said she would go with me and tell them what she wanted to see for me. I think she finally believed that I'm trying to change. I think doing this is going to make me and her closer...The rest of my family was another story. They wanted me to go to school wherever they sent me*

*because I didn't deserve to be making any demands...That's why I am so happy about my mom."*

Likewise, Sean's mother showed her support by making her own attempts to find ways to remove her son from alternative school. Sean stated happily:

*"My mother was behind me because she visited the school before I started. She saw the type of kids that were there and knew that I wouldn't last...She said, boy you will be fighting in here the first day. All the kids they don't want, they throw away in here. She phoned some people about how to get me out of alternative education. I don't think she would have done this if she had not seen it with her own eyes. She said she was proud of me, and I think this was the first time she ever said that, I am glad I did it."*

*Motivation*. The most common theme that emerged from both the group-based and the individual interviews centered on issues related to motivation. In general, participants discussed their motivation to seek placement in a traditional school setting for two main reasons: (1) as a means of changing people's negative perceptions of them, and (2) to ensure that they received their high school diploma.

*Change negative perceptions*. Upon being released from the detention center, many participants felt as though they were reformed and deserved a chance to prove to others that their behavior and attitude had changed for the best. Many acknowledged that alternative education was not the best placement for them since their self-perceptions had changed to more pro-social identities of themselves. Anthony stated, *"I think just coming out, we want a chance to succeed, and see if the stuff we learned while locked up can work for us...going to alternative school would just be setting us up. I think we deserve a chance."* Of most importance to the participants, they wanted an opportunity to demonstrate to others that they could be successful in a traditional school setting despite their past. For many, the negative remarks made by family members, friends, and even teachers in relation to their ability to succeed, was a powerful motivator for them to seek a traditional education and do so in a successful manner. Keeton passionately mentioned:

*"My motivation is to show people that you can come from nothing and still finish something...I know a high school diploma is not a big deal to some people, but around here it is...I want the younger people in my family to know that you can mess up with the law or whatever else and still be given another chance."*

Terrance further remarked:

*"I heard one of the ladies at the school say that they [the seven participants] will be back into alternative education before nine weeks and she said we probably will be failing too....I don't think no one gives us a chance or believes in us...I'm going to show them that I deserve a high school diploma, and I ain't supposed to get no GED...Everybody should have a*

*high school diploma and to be tried to be talked out of it ain't fair. My diploma will show the people at the detention center, my probation officer, and the school, and anybody else that bet against me that I did it."*

*Achieve a diploma.* As referred to in the latter part of Terrance's statement is the motivation that many participants had to graduate from high school. On many occasions, the participants voiced concerns in their ability to remain in alternative school long enough to receive a diploma. Keeton mentions, *"I think they knew they'd be setting people up and if you want to go to school and learn something, alternative education ain't the place."* Accordingly, many feared that placement in an alternative educational setting would *"set them up for failure;"* leaving them with no diploma and having a negative impact on their future aspirations and job opportunities. Marcus posited:

*"I think everybody wants to do as good or better than their parents, so a high school diploma is a must...Plus if I ever decide to get a job, I will need a diploma. If you look in your family and community, those who are doing the worse are those who don't have an education...Sometimes without a high school education forces you to do illegal stuff."*

Each participant understood that *"a high school diploma gives you a better chance"* for a successful and productive future. In particular, Andre makes the statement, *"I want a diploma because I want a diploma...If I get this, no one can take this from me...Who knows? One day I might want to go to the community college."* Moreover, many sought a diploma as a means of escaping their harsh realities. For example, Jerome mentions:

*"I am afraid of what's going to happen to me in the future if I don't get an education...Man, it's tough in this neighborhood, and most of us don't get out...The ones that get out are the ones who go to school and really go off to college...I hope a high school diploma will get me out of here. I hope the high school diploma leads to better things for me. At least I hope it does...I got to find a way to get out of here."*

An overarching theme that emerged from the interviews was that participants understood that receiving a diploma would allow them opportunities to better their future and maybe even attend college.

Sean serves as an exemplary example by admitting:

*"I think I finally understand that if I don't go to school and finish, I might end up doing crime as a profession. I got to make changes, and the first one is to get an education...If I don't, I will be stuck in the life. I have to do this for me and my future...I see people every day in my neighborhood that wasted their life like I am doing and never get anywhere...I don't want to end up like that. I have to get my education and try to leave the game and settle down away from the madness. This is what motivates me, and the hope that there is something better waiting for me when I graduate."*

Participants came to realize during their time at the detention center that an education would be beneficial to them sometime throughout their lives. They initially wanted to prove or show others in their families, in the school district, and the court system that they were capable of being successful in their academic pursuits. This anger and "chip-on-the-shoulder" mentality was the catalyst for them to be successful in school. They were aware of the statistics indicating that they were less likely to graduate than peers who have no delinquent background. More importantly, they acknowledged that their having been imprisoned in a juvenile detention center placed them at an even greater risk for academic failure. These facts motivated the young men to seek education in a traditional school setting and succeed in receiving their diploma.

## DISCUSSION

### Participant Update

Sixteen of the 23 students that started this journey with the original seven were enrolled in alternative education and GED programs. Of the 16, four have been expelled from alternative school for behaviors that met zero-tolerance mandates, five have stopped participating in their GED programs, two dropped out of school, one was on a modified school schedule (going two days a week), and four remained in alternative school. The participants in this study were followed for one year from spring 2008 until the start of the spring 2009 semester. At the conclusion of the study all were on schedule to graduate. These participants may have had an advantage due to their prior academic success. They were not typical delinquent and low-income students. With the exception of one of the participants, they all read and did math at or above their grade levels which may have increased the chances of their academic success.

### Summary of Findings

Like so many at-risk African American youth, participants had very little support from parents, peers, and the community. The parents may have been too busy, too tired, otherwise encumbered, or disinterested to concern themselves about the educational needs and desires of their children. The lack of interest seemed to be a motivating factor for participants. At some point participants may have felt that a high school diploma was unimportant but changed their perspective along the way. Their refusal to enroll in alternative education indicated that they saw the need and benefit of a standard high school education and environment.

Over the course of the academic year, the participants displayed tremendous growth. Once they embraced the notion of getting a high school diploma and made that a personal goal, there was a noticeable behavioral change in each of them. During their group meetings and individual sessions, they readily admitted that they have slowly moved away from their criminal behavior and have decreased their drug use. Because of their desire and proven commitment to an education they have been shown leniency by the court system and have received some attention from the school community. They are encouraged and praised by their probation officers and held up as examples of successful transition from detention to school and the com-

munity. The schools they attend were made aware of the participants before they enrolled and were strongly encouraged to keep a close eye on them. Principals and teachers admitted that they were model students and encouraged them to join extracurricular activities at the schools. This support has given them the confidence to want to continue on a positive path and reinforces their choice to refuse alternative education was the correct decision.

Participants were given an opportunity to return to a traditional school setting in which they were able to socialize with peers that were diverse in interest, behaviors, motivations, and values. All participants stated that they felt going to regular school helped them stay out of trouble and focus on completing high school. The ability to interact with peers who had things on their minds other than criminal activities was an inspiration to participants. They all admitted that they believed they could get an education and move forward with their lives and escape the trappings of returning to the detention center. It is important to mention that the current study examined seven participants; therefore, to generalize their experience to a larger group may not yield the same findings.

## CONCLUSION

Zero-tolerance mandates have disproportionately impacted minority and economically disadvantaged youth and their families. A number of school districts have been able to suspend students for long periods of time and to expel students without providing alternative education options. School districts attempt to accommodate minor behavior infractions such as truancy, smoking on campus, and some unruly behavior. But for students that display delinquent and criminal behavior, the zero-tolerance policies have given school districts license to remove students from campus, sometimes permanently. The preventative aspects of the federal acts are often overlooked because implementation of mediation programs, conflict resolution programs, and counseling are time consuming and often expensive. Expulsion sends a clear message of behavior expectations and makes district administrators, teachers, other school personnel, and students feel safer without the presence of certain students. This was the initial intent of the federal acts. However, many less desirable, unintended applications and outcomes to the zero-tolerance mandates have also occurred.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although few would quarrel with a policy of zero-tolerance toward youths who misbehave; unfortunately, when it is examined closely, it turns out to have very little to do with zero-tolerance, and everything to do with one-size-fits-all mandatory punishment (APA 2008). Of particular interest, zero-tolerance mandates affect students of color and those who are disenfranchised at disproportionate numbers by placing them in alternative educational settings. Research has shown that alternative education leads to educational inequality and inequity (APA 2008; Kim and Taylor 2008), leaving many students unprepared for the world of work. The current study has shown that by enabling students to return to their home school or

traditional school setting allows them to receive required credits to graduate from high school. The fact that participants were on schedule to graduate and receive their high school diplomas indicate that the return to the traditional school setting may be more beneficial than requiring alternative education.

In essence, zero-tolerance policies would have prevented participants from returning to their home schools if they had not appealed the alternative education placement. In fact, for the fall 2008 semester, 18 students residing in detention centers, inpatient drug treatment, and psychiatric hospitals were automatically enrolled in alternative education by this study's subject school district. None of the 18 refused the placement; therefore, the district did not feel obligated to inform them that the return to the traditional school setting was an option through the appeal process. Even with the apparent success of the seven participants, the school district automatically enrolled the 18 in alternative education programs. The fate of the 18 students closely mirrored that of the 16 students mentioned in the current investigation who accepted alternative placement. If in fact students will continue to be forced to enroll in alternative school settings, there are two important recommendations stemming from the current research that may improve their retention and graduation rates. Of most importance, these same guidelines can be applied to students demanding placement in traditional school settings upon being released from detention centers.

Our first recommendation is that support must be provided from both parents and teachers. Educational support is particularly needed since research has shown that 40 percent of at-risk students drop out of high school (Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Taylor 2001). In addition, with the tensions that exist, both within and outside, of alternative schools between rival gang members, there is a critical need for students to feel comfortable and as though there is mutual respect between students and teachers (Kim and Taylor 2008). Without the support of primary caregivers, mentors, and/or teachers, students with a history of delinquency may feel as though an education and diploma are not within their grasp. Our final recommendation would be for school districts to be open to reconnecting alienated youth and reestablish the school bond for students at-risk for discipline problems. When lines of communication are opened between schools, parents, law enforcement and mental health professionals, alternatives to school expulsion and placement in unconventional school settings can be developed and implemented (APA 2008).

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