



Talia Santiago



CHARACTER STRENGTH RESPECT

SOCIAL ISSUE: *Zero-Tolerance Policies*



Causes and Research


Imagine you are a high school student. You made a bad decision to skip school one day. Your school finds out. This is the first time you have skipped school, but that does not matter. You are suspended for five days. It is hard to keep up with your work once you get behind. Your grades suffer. You feel angry and feel like your school treated you unfairly. You feel like there's no point in trying anymore at school. This is the kind of situation that Talia worked towards stopping.


In many schools, there are automatic punishments for certain actions. These are called zero tolerance policies. Zero tolerance policies became popular after the 1999 school shooting in Columbine. Some people say that rising school violence is a cause for **zero tolerance policies**. Everyone agrees that school safety is important, but sometimes good kids are hurt by zero tolerance policies. For example, students have been punished for having a plastic knife in their lunchbox to cut their food. Other students have gotten in trouble for having pepper spray in their bookbag to protect themselves as they



Photo credit top: <http://www.pabar.org/public/committees/childavo/basedyouthcourt.asp>

 **THE FACTS** 

- › Received the Young Heroes Award in 2013 when she was 16 years old
- › Attended Kensington Culinary Arts School in Philadelphia 
- › Graduated high school and is now studying to become a nurse

 **VOCABULARY**

Zero tolerance policy › punishing students who break a rule without allowing any excuses or second chances

Youth court › a group of young people who review their classmates' actions and decide on the consequences

 **SOURCES**

- › <http://www.pabar.org/public/committees/childavo/basedyouthcourt.asp>
- › Recommendation Letter by Keith Bailey
- › Interview with Talia Santiago – August 8th, 2013

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walk through a dangerous neighborhood. Many students who have made a mistake for the first time get suspended, or even expelled. This takes them out of school. Talia does not believe that being out of school helps students improve behavior and attitude. In fact, her research showed that students who are suspended just one time, are twice as likely to drop out of school.

Goals and Obstacles

Talia's goal was to change how students are punished. She wanted to keep students in school as much as possible and to give them a voice. But some people who make the rules for the School District of Philadelphia wouldn't like this change.

Actions

Talia helped to restart the **Youth Court** Program at Kensington Culinary Arts High School. A Youth Court is a group of students who listen to their classmate's story when a mistake is made. Then they decide as a group how the student should be punished. The punishments help students learn from their mistakes. Over the summer, Talia got an internship with the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office. During her internship, she spoke in front of city council about how important youth courts are.

"Kids think they have no say, but they need to know they have a voice. Everyone has a voice, no matter what age."

— Talia Santiago

Impact

People have started to listen. Other schools have asked Kensington Culinary Arts High School for advice. These other schools want to gather students together and start their own youth court programs. Talia knows there is more work to do. She will continue to speak about youth courts until every student is treated fairly and has a chance for success.