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. They became popular after the Columbine tragedy, a school shooting in 1999. People wanted more focus on school safety. Many students who have made a mistake for the first time get suspended. This takes them out of school. Talia does not believe being out of school helps students improve behavior and attitude. In fact, her research showed that 9th grade students who were suspended just one time were twice as likely to drop out of school.

THE FACTS

- Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Received the Young Heroes Award in 2013
- Attended Kensington Culinary Arts High School in Philadelphia

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://youngheroesadvisors.libertymuseum.org/heroes/talia/

Photo credit: http://www.pabar.org/public/committees/childavo/basedyouthcourt.asp
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 used her Freedom of Petition to ask her principal to change the school rules. She 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.

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.

“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