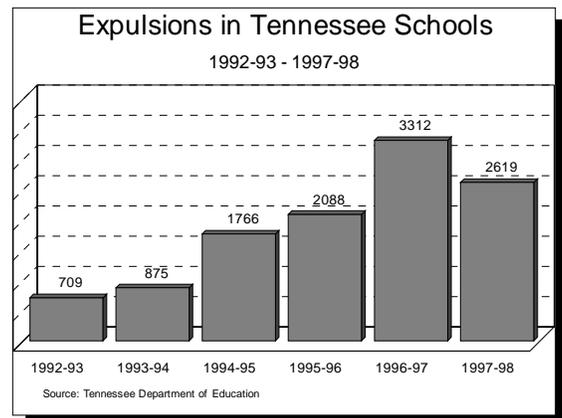


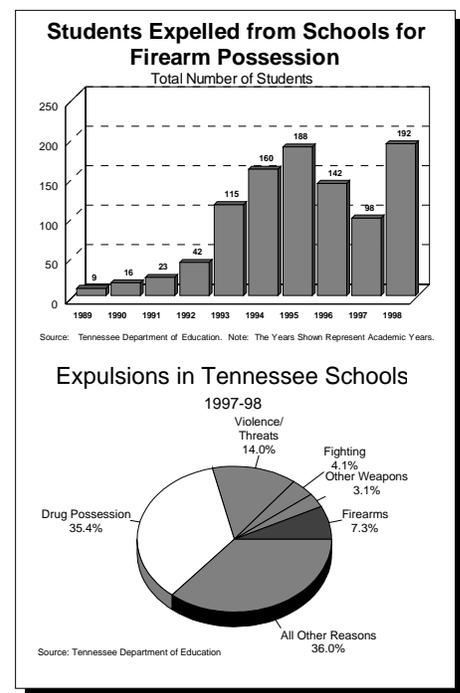
School Safety

The 1997-98 school year in Tennessee was marred in May by a fatal shooting in the parking lot of Lincoln County High School, which, along with several multiple shootings in schools across the nation, raised concerns about the safety of children in schools. However, schools are safer than the community, according to the *Annual Report on School Safety, 1998*. Only 7.1 percent of Tennessee students responding to the 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance survey reported being threatened or injured by a weapon on school property. This figure was slightly lower than the national percentage of 7.4.



Schools across the country have instituted school safety strategies, including expelling students whose conduct makes them a risk to other students, restricting access to outsiders, placing school resource or law enforcement officers in the schools, and reducing the potential for conflict and violence.

In 1995, the state legislature instituted a “zero tolerance” policy for state schools. Schools are required to expel for one calendar year any student who brings a weapon to school. Students will also be expelled for illegally possessing narcotic or stimulant drugs and committing battery on a teacher. State law gives schools the right to search students or their possessions on school property.



Last year, 126,813 Tennessee students were suspended, and 2,619 expelled. Expulsions decreased by 21 percent from the previous year, reversing a 10-year trend. Fourteen percent of expulsions were for violence or threatened violence; 7.3 percent were for firearms, and 3.1 percent for other weapons. More than a third of expulsions were for possession or use of drugs.

Local school systems determine the punishment for students whose troublesome behavior is not covered under the zero tolerance laws. Local systems also use their own definitions to differentiate between suspension (temporary removal of a student from attending a school or activity) and expulsion (removal of students from the school’s membership or enrollment lists).

Some experts point out that expulsion further isolates already disturbed students, and the Tennessee School Boards Association’s legislative agenda requests adequate funding for alternative schools for suspended and expelled students. The association has asked the legislature for more clarity in defining zero-tolerance offenses. In January 1999, a U.S. District Court judge ruled that the expulsion of a Knox County student whose friend had left a knife in his car was unfair. The ruling focused on the effectiveness of the school’s appeal process and the student’s intent in the matter.