

Center For
POLICING EQUITY

REDESIGNING PUBLIC SAFETY

K-12 Schools

Authors

Scarlet Neath, M.P.P.

Hilary Rau, J.D.

Acknowledgments

Kim Shayo Buchanan, J.D., J.S.D.

Jo Buckley, M.Ed.

Marquise Carter

Eric Cumberbatch, M.Ed.

Eugene Ebron, M.Ed.

Don’te Franklin, M.P.A.P.

Lydia Imani, M.A.

Rashad James, J.D.

R. Nicole Johnson-Ahorlu, Ph.D.

Ajua Kouadio, M.A.

Max Markham, J.D.

Charlotte Resing, J.D.

Evan Riddick, M.A.

Sarah Beth Weintraub

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This report and a companion brief are available at policingequity.org/school-safety.

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Redesigning Public Safety: K-12 Schools is the latest in a series of public safety white papers to be produced by the Center for Policing Equity (CPE); in recent months, CPE has also released white papers on mental health emergency response and traffic safety. The fourth paper in the series, concerning substance use, will be published in the coming months.

Taken together, these resources address critical public safety issues that typically receive politically-motivated, ill-informed, or simply too little attention, but are central to any vision of public safety redesign that will be meaningful, lasting, and equitable. People closely engaged in these areas of work have long had little choice but to adopt patchwork approaches to limited effect, with the best of intentions but little access to the resources necessary to build the systems of care these needs call out for.

The politically expedient solution in each of these areas has for decades been to increase the presence of armed police officers. As our white papers demonstrate, however, officers are not trained for tasks that call for evidence-led systems of care, and rather than provide lasting solutions, increasing the number of armed officers increases the burden on Black and Brown communities that are already living with persistently inequitable policing and its consequences.

Failing to provide those systems of care is a form of active disinvestment. Without them, armed school resource officers (SROs) are often the only resource for children in K-12 classrooms who face trouble at school or at home, and thus can be seen as a comforting presence; this can also be said of officers responding to a call for service—when compassionate professionals bring their best to critical situations, those they have helped are often grateful.

CPE looks well beyond individual officers, however, and studies the policies, procedures, and culture that placed those officers in those situations and has for so long created the unjust, ineffective, and unequal policing that the organization was founded to address. Across the board, the data show that shrinking policing's footprint while also investing in appropriate systems of care is the only way to build public safety systems that are just, fair, and equitable, for all.

This is why we never recommend change for change's sake; the structures currently in place must be replaced, not merely deconstructed, if public safety redesign is to be successful. The recommendations in all of our white papers describe a vision that is science-led, holistic, and provides a blueprint for the future, not a one-stop shop for unfounded panaceas.

Our white papers detail the harms of the status quo, lay out what action can be taken to successfully increase public safety, and suggest alternate approaches that are supported by science and in every case, recommendations are developed in consultation with a wide and representative body of stakeholders. In our schools, the evidence is clear that investing in systems other than law enforcement is what makes children safe.

CPE is very proud to be able to present this latest white paper. We look forward to using it as a starting point for many fruitful discussions aimed at meaningful change in the public safety systems serving our K-12 schools.

Introduction

All children deserve to feel safe in school and have meaningful opportunities to learn. Many schools use police for school safety: Approximately half of K-12 public schools have an armed police officer present.[1] But school police do not reduce school shootings or serious crime. School-based police instead routinely ticket and arrest students–especially Black and Latinx students–for misbehavior that is normal for their age. Police are trained to use force for compliance, and as documented in hundreds of reports, officers have beaten, tased, and handcuffed students, even in elementary school settings.[2] School-based arrests impede students' academic achievement and increase their likelihood of lawbreaking and arrest later in life.[3] Reliance on police for school safety has also been linked to school staff and administrators being more likely to suspend and expel Black students. To create safe schools, policymakers and administrators should remove school-based police as part of ending surveillance and punishment of students. Instead, communities should invest in public health strategies–such as school diversion measures and restorative justice initiatives–that foster young people's development and school safety.

School policing programs originated as a response to desegregation and Black migration in urban school districts in the 1950s and 1960s.[4] They became much more common when states took advantage of federal funding programs enacted as part of tough-on-crime policies in the 1990s.[5] At the same time, federal legislation propelled states to enact zero tolerance policies that mandated punitive responses to certain offenses in schools.[6] More recently, states have allocated funding for police in schools as a response to high-profile school shootings.[7] Statistically, however, school shootings are extremely rare,[8] and police stationed in schools do not prevent deaths from an active shooter.[9] And officers now routinely arrest students for common misbehaviors such as talking back, texting, not following directions, fighting, threatening a classmate, vandalism, dress code violations, or taking another student's property on a dare.[10]

Students' experiences with punishment in school are not equitable: Disabled students,[11*] and students who are Black,[12] Latinx,[13] Indigenous,[14] and/or LGBTQ[15] are more likely than White students to be suspended and arrested. One study of 2.5 million students found that federal grants for police in middle schools increased discipline rates by 6% per year, mostly due to low-level violations.[16] The same study found that discipline increased 7% more for Black students, compared to 4% for White students.[17] Research has shown that this disproportionate impact cannot be explained by differences in student behavior.[18]

Police in schools are a serious threat to student well-being and work against the basic purpose of schools: to be safe places for learning.[19] Research has documented negative mental health consequences of police exposure for Black youth, including children.[20] And while complete data on how often police hit, tase, or use other physical force on students are not available, a recent report documented 285 incidents of police assaults on students from 2011 through 2021–more than 80% of which were against Black students.[21]

By removing children from their learning environment and not addressing or accommodating underlying causes of behavioral issues, police enforcement in schools denies students the necessary support to learn and grow. Students who are arrested are less likely to graduate from high school[22] and enroll in college[23]–factors that increase their likelihood of further involvement with the criminal legal system.[24] Undocumented students also face serious consequences from police contact because an arrest–even if it does not lead to a conviction–can lead to a deportation or permanently block them from being eligible for legal immigration status.[25] Similarly, students who are suspended and expelled are more likely to drop out of school and have future contact with the criminal legal system.[26]

POLICE IN SCHOOLS ARE A SERIOUS THREAT TO STUDENT WELL-BEING AND WORK AGAINST THE BASIC PURPOSE OF SCHOOLS: TO BE SAFE PLACES FOR LEARNING

* "Disabled students" refers to children served by an individualized education program–that is, from the IDEA–or a 504 plan. For more information, see: https://dredf.org/legal-advocacy/laws/a-comparison-of-ada-idea-and-section-504/.

A variety of educational and public health approaches, in contrast, can equip school staff with appropriate resources to prevent disruptive behavior and keep schools safe. These approaches focus on meeting students' individual needs by developing their social-emotional skills, ensuring adequate mental health supports, and fostering a community of connectedness and belonging at school.[27] For example, school-based counselors are associated with increased attendance, reduced rates of suspension and other discipline, and improved graduation rates.[28] But such interventions are not widespread: Nearly one in three students attend schools that reported having a law enforcement officer but no school-based counselor, nurse, psychologist, and/or social worker.[29] And research has shown that schools with a greater share of Black students are more likely to use punitive discipline and less likely to use alternative practices such as restorative justice.[30]

School safety requires investing in effective programs that reduce bullying, violence, and misbehavior that disrupts learning. It also requires ending unnecessary, inequitable, and widespread systems of police enforcement and surveillance so that students can learn without fear of criminalization or deportation. This process must include listening to students who are disproportionately impacted by punishment tactics to understand what makes them feel safe, as well as supporting teachers with training and other resources during implementation of alternative responses to misbehavior. Together, these changes can foster the sense of belonging and support necessary to keep all students safe.

The recommendations in this report guide communities, school administrators, and policymakers on how to achieve this vision of school safety. They reflect the fact that police are not equipped to, and should not, be invited to keep order in schools or address student misbehavior. They also acknowledge and aim to undo the systemic racism and ableism in the criminal legal, educational, and health care systems that often deny Black, Latinx, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and disabled children the safe environment they need to thrive in school.



End School-Based Policing Programs

Punitive responses to student misbehavior disproportionately harm Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ students, especially those who are disabled. And school-based policing remains widespread even as reported arrests of all children[31] and the rate at which students report experiencing serious crime have both decreased.[32] The rate at which students ages 12 to 18 reported experiencing theft, rape, sexual assault, robbery, and assault at school decreased 78% from 2009 to 2020, mirroring trends seen outside the school setting.[33]

The latest available data report a total of 54,321 school-based arrests annually.[34] Police officers arrest Black students 2.8 times as often as White students,[35] and disabled students 3.3 times as often as students without disabilities.[36] Disabled students are also subjected to restraints at extremely disproportionate rates; the most recent data show that nearly 80% of students restrained are disabled.[37] Evidence shows that students of different racial groups engage in behavior like drug use at similar rates, and that systemic racism plays a significant role in funneling Black children toward punishment.[38] For example, one study concluded that the strongest predictors of racial disparities in harsh discipline were school-level factors like principals' perspectives on discipline.[39] Another study found that differences in treatment and support for Black children explained 46% of the difference in rates of suspension and expulsion, while differences in behavior explained just 9%.[40]

School-based arrests are fueled in large part by school resource officers (SROs), law enforcement officers who work either part- or full-time in a school setting, as well as other officers who are stationed in schools but employed by police departments. The most recently available national data show that 39% of public elementary schools, 68% of middle schools, and 67% of high schools in the United States had SROs on campus.[41*] Despite these officers' prevalence, there is little uniformity and specificity in their day-to-day roles and responsibilities.[42] Many school-based police are routinely involved in behavioral issues that school staff should handle: In one 2013 study, 76% of surveyed principals with an SRO on campus reported that the officer was involved in student discipline.[43] And an analysis of 2010–2012 Oakland School Police data revealed that 72% of requests from schools that the police responded to were for "non-criminal conduct" or "other services"–rather than for alcohol or other drugs, property harm, or bodily harm.[44]

* This report uses the terms SROs and school-based police interchangeably for consistency, given that most school-based police are SROs.

What police spend their time on is likely shaped by which students attend the school where they are stationed: A recent survey of school-based police found that SROs in a largely White suburban school district saw their role as protecting students from external threats, while those in an urban district with a larger share of Black students perceived the threat as coming from the students themselves.[45]

Available evidence documents a clear relationship among school-based police, discipline, and criminalization.[46] Schools with designated law enforcement officers arrest students at 3.5 times the rate of schools without SROs.[47] Studies have also found that increased police presence in schools leads to higher rates of referral to law enforcement for Black and Latinx students[48] and more arrests for "disorderly conduct," which could potentially include behavior such as horseplay, shouting, fighting, or disrupting class.[49] School-based police have also been found to drive "exclusionary discipline," that is, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions,[50] especially for Black students.[51] Exclusionary discipline predicts students' future delinquency[52] and involvement in the criminal legal system[53]–meaning that this contact by school-based police exacerbates the school-to-prison pipeline, which overwhelmingly impacts Black and Latinx children. A recent study found that for Black children who experience contact with the police by the eighth grade, the odds of being arrested by age 20 were 11 times greater than for their White counterparts.[54]

SROS IN A LARGELY WHITE SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT SAW THEIR ROLE AS PROTECTING STUDENTS FROM EXTERNAL THREATS, WHILE THOSE IN AN URBAN DISTRICT WITH A LARGER SHARE OF BLACK STUDENTS PERCEIVED THE THREAT AS COMING FROM THE STUDENTS THEMSELVES

The experience of simply being exposed to police in schools diminishes school safety, especially for Black, Latinx, and other vulnerable students who may feel less safe with police present.[55] This is because *feelings* of safety influence school climate–which includes a sense of belonging and connectedness. And school climate, in turn, is closely related to behavioral issues and violence at schools.[56] A recent academic study found that students stopped by police reported greater school disengagement,[57] and a survey of young people who have been stopped by police found that students reported overall more pronounced post-traumatic symptoms when they were stopped at schools than at other locations.[58] A recent national survey of students found that nearly two-thirds supported removing police from schools; students also said they would prefer schools to invest in other supports like restorative practices, counselors, and teachers.[59]

The presence of police in schools fuels unwarranted, inequitable, and lasting punishment. It also contributes significantly to the widespread failure of schools to meet their legal obligations to accommodate disabled students. The following recommendations focus on eliminating school policing in order to make schools safer for students, develop inclusive and welcoming school climates, and disrupt the many harms that stem from police contact.

THE PRESENCE OF POLICE IN SCHOOLS FUELS UNWARRANTED, INEQUITABLE, AND LASTING PUNISHMENT

1. End school-based policing and SRO programs.

Evidence on the efficacy of school-based police does not show that they improve school safety.[60] A few rigorously designed studies have shown SROs to be associated with a reduced number of recorded violent offenses in schools,[61] but the effect of police on the actual frequency of fights or assaults is inconclusive. Importantly, student misbehavior that might otherwise be treated as a school disciplinary infraction is more likely to be reported as a "crime" if police are present.[62] Several studies have shown that schools with SROs have more recorded crimes than schools without police.[63] One recent nationwide study of SROs, for example, showed that school-based police may contribute to fewer incidences of physical assaults and fights but were associated with an increase in gun-related offenses, including threats.[64] Other evidence, including the findings of a meta-analysis, has shown that SROs are associated with a higher number of recorded drug and weapon offenses[65] and more arrests for drug crimes.[66]

Because these programs have no clear benefits to safety, drive exclusionary discipline and arrests, and negatively affect educational outcomes and school climate, dozens of cities and school districts have ended school-based police departments and SRO programs, and instead call police to school only when they are needed for a genuine emergency. Many are also redirecting funding to counselors, social workers, and other resources to support student well-being.[67]

Many of these changes happened following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, so there is not much evidence about how they are impacting intended outcomes, such as racial disparities in school discipline. Some of the communities that removed police officers from schools since 2020 have reinstated them, reflecting the difficulty of implementation in some places.[68] Jurisdictions considering alternatives to school-based policing programs should be mindful that even without police on campus, school safety procedures can still perpetuate racial bias and unnecessary punishment. Removing police from schools should be part of a holistic approach to school safety that includes investments in public health approaches, regulations limiting the role of law enforcement in school discipline, and a comprehensive reexamination of the policies and training that shape how school staff interact with students to assess potential contributors to racial disparities in student discipline and referrals to police.

Examples of jurisdictions that moved to eliminate school-based policing in 2020 and 2021:

- **Oakland, California.** In June 2020, following nine years of advocacy by the Black Organizing Project, the Oakland City Council passed a unanimous resolution to eliminate the Oakland School Police Department.[69] Following that vote, the Black Organizing Project asked teachers to sign a pledge not to call police for student disciplinary issues, to prevent the expected increase in 911 calls.[70] Later that year, the council approved a plan to limit the circumstances in which police could be called to schools, establish a culture and climate department to retrain unsworn school security officers in restorative justice practices, and respond to student mental health crises with social workers or psychologists.[71] As of October 2022, the Black Organizing Project had collaborated with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) to implement new campus safety procedures, and the district had retrained 46 officers in restorative justice and implicit bias to provide security as "culture and climate keepers."[72] From August 2021 through April 2022 (a period that included some virtual or hybrid learning[73]) OUSD schools made 93% fewer calls to the police than in the same time frame in 2019–2020.[74]

- **Minneapolis, Minnesota.** In June 2020, the Minneapolis school board voted unanimously to end its contract with the Minneapolis Police Department.[75] Since then, the board has hired unarmed, unsworn public safety support specialists.[76] Initial evidence is promising: In the 2021–2022 school year there were 50 referrals to law enforcement, compared to an average of 324 annually in the years 2015–2020, and suspensions dropped significantly. But racial disparities in disciplinary actions, particularly for Black and Indigenous students, remain troubling.[77]

- **Arlington, Virginia.** The Arlington School Board voted in June 2021 to remove school resource officers following the recommendations of a working group that convened for more than a year.[78] After seeking community input, the school board and the Arlington County Police Department released a new memorandum of understanding in March 2022, stipulating that the department will not be present on campuses unless requested, and that schools will handle all code of conduct violations without involving the police unless required by statute.[79]

- **Des Moines, Iowa.** After student-led organizing drew attention to racial disparities in arrests of students, the Des Moines School District asked the Des Moines Police Department to make several changes to their school-based policing program. In February 2021, the police department responded by terminating the contract. The school district reallocated the $750,000 saved to hire restorative practice staff; every school now has a restorative practice trainer. School-based arrests have decreased 82% district-wide in the first year of the program.[80]

2. Redirect state and federal funding for SRO programs and police-school partnerships toward public health approaches.

Significant funding for police in schools is relatively recent: In 1975, just 1% of U.S. schools had law enforcement officers on campus.[81] Following the 1999 mass shooting at Columbine High School, an initial $70 million in federal funding was allocated to put police in schools in more than 300 communities nationwide.[82] Similar state and federal action occurred after school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut,[83] and Parkland, Florida.[84] As of June 2021, the federal government had invested more than $1 billion through various grant programs to subsidize the hiring of police in schools since Columbine.[85] Although federal grants are often instrumental in putting police in schools, local jurisdictions are often left to fund expensive school policing programs in their budgets after the first few years.[86]

The May 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, prompted a national conversation about the efficacy of police to prevent or interrupt the kinds of extreme violence used in recent years to justify their presence in schools.[87] While high-profile school shootings of this nature typically prompt political action to fund additional officers, the failure of hundreds of law enforcement officers to intervene in the Uvalde tragedy echoes research consistently finding that armed officers do not prevent or interrupt school shootings.[88] A 2019 analysis of all school shootings from April 1999 through May 2018 concluded that there were no differences in the severity of shootings based on whether or not an SRO was present.[89] Another recent study on mass school shootings from 1980 through 2019 found that the rate of deaths was 2.83 times *greater* when an armed guard was present; the researchers theorized that this may be due to high rates of suicidality among active shooters (known as “suicide by cop”).[90] And though indiscriminate mass shootings are cited by those who wish to increase police presence, most school shootings are not targeted attacks but shootings of one or two people, incidents that happen too quickly for anyone–including stationed police–to intervene.[91]

THE FAILURE OF HUNDREDS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS TO INTERVENE IN THE UVALDE TRAGEDY ECHOES RESEARCH CONSISTENTLY FINDING THAT ARMED OFFICERS DO NOT PREVENT OR INTERRUPT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Federal grants for school police have failed to achieve their intended goal. This funding should be diverted to evidence-based, trauma-informed services and support staff that better address the mental health and academic needs of vulnerable students. For example, Baltimore County Public Schools implemented a program to help school staff appropriately respond to and prevent emotional and behavioral crises, which resulted in a 56% decline in suspensions. The annual cost of the program was approximately 5% of what the school district spends on police every year.[92]

Threat Assessment Teams

An increasing number of states have recently mandated, funded, or required police inclusion in threat assessment teams, despite a lack of evidence that these teams achieve their goals. Based on behavioral threat assessment practices developed by the U.S. Secret Service,[93] the teams review potential threats to school safety that are submitted to them and decide a course of action to prevent violence.[94] Teams typically include school administrators, school mental health professionals, and sometimes law enforcement. Threat assessment teams are widespread: In the 2015–2016 school year, 42% of public schools nationwide had a threat assessment team.[95]

Threat assessment teams have the potential to increase punitive responses to student behavior. Model policies from states that have recently required these teams encourage reporting of a wide variety of perceived behavioral issues; Texas, for example, encourages reporting of "anything out of the ordinary."[96] Because threat assessment teams typically include police and are sometimes required by law to follow a law enforcement or disciplinary response, they have the potential to funnel a wide range of student behaviors toward punishment rather than supportive care.

There is very limited evidence about the efficacy of threat assessment teams. A recent study of implementation of Virginia's threat assessment teams–which must include police–found that 60% of reported threats involved only potential harm to self.[97] Of the remaining incidents, 43% resulted in out-of-school suspensions.[98] It also found that there were just 18 attempted "high-level" threats (including "unspecified verbal threat" and inappropriate touching) out of 21,539 analyzed referrals to threat assessment teams.[99] School authorities thwarted half of those incidents, and half were carried out to some extent–for example, by bringing a weapon to school. None of the analyzed threats involved injuries.[100] Additionally, no evidence exists about the extent to which threat assessment teams affected these outcomes compared to a school-based response or health intervention.[101] The primary developer of the state's student threat assessment guidelines model led this research.[102]

Though available evidence from Virginia has not shown disparities in the outcomes of threat assessment teams for disabled students or non-White students, disparities have been documented in other places. For example, in Albuquerque, 56% of all threat assessments were against students in special education and 9.6% were against Black students, despite only making up 18% and 2.6% of the student body, respectively.[103]

Threat assessment teams are not an evidence-based strategy to improve school safety. They subject current and former students, as well as parents, to increased surveillance,[104] provide a way to circumvent policies and legal protections that govern responses to student behavior, and are likely to exacerbate punitive responses and racial disparities.[105] They should not be required or implemented widely. At a minimum, policymakers and school districts should regulate existing threat assessment teams by excluding incidents of self-harm from being assessed–such incidents should be evaluated by school mental health professionals. They should also exclude police from being part of such teams. School staff should follow the guidance outlined in the following section of this report to assess when to engage police in the rare cases that a reported threat has a specific and immediate threat of violence that cannot be handled by school administrators.

End Police Response To Routine Student Conduct Issues

Educators, community stakeholders, parents, and even law enforcement leaders agree that police are not an appropriate response to student conduct. In its 2020 guidance on school-police partnerships, for example, the International Association of Chiefs of Police states that school police "should not be involved in student discipline."[106] And some district attorneys are declining to prosecute school-based incidents unless they involve a serious crime.[107] But in reality, a wide array of norms, laws, and policies supporting the criminalization of student conduct issues means that school staff regularly call police to respond to student conduct issues even when there is not an armed police officer present on campus. According to the latest available national data, schools referred 229,470 students to law enforcement annually,[108] likely a severe undercount.[109]

Black students who fear the response of police have reason to do so. An Associated Press analysis of 3,000 police use-of-force incidents on children younger than 16 found that more than 50% of those children were Black.[110] And a 2021 analysis of Seattle Police Department's data by CPE found that police used force against Black people of all ages at more than seven times the rate against White people; this disparity was even higher when police recorded using force on children who were age 14 or younger.[111]

Research by CPE's cofounder Dr. Philip Atiba Goff has shown that Black children are seen as less innocent and older than their White peers,[112] which may contribute to officers' biased and punitive enforcement. In a 2014 study, police officers were found to overestimate the age of 13-year-old Black boys by an average of more than four years and perceive them as more responsible for their actions than White boys of the same age. What's more, stereotypes about Black people were shown to be related to officers' use of force against children.[113] A Georgetown Law Center for Poverty and Inequality study similarly found that adults view Black girls as more adult than their White peers.[114]

Schools' reliance on law enforcement to solve school discipline problems–whether or not police are stationed on campus–has contributed to the excess criminalization of children in school and associated negative consequences.[115] In response, advocates are taking steps to limit the involvement of police in school discipline. The following strategies can help others achieve this goal by clearly articulating and restricting the circumstances in which police can be called to K-12 school campuses.

3. School districts should implement policies specifying that staff may not call the police to address student behavior unless there is an emergency.

School district policies should make clear that police involvement may not be requested in response to student behavior unless the student causes serious physical harm to students, staff, or others in the school; poses an imminent risk or serious threat of physical harm; or possesses a firearm or explosive.

School district policies should state that requesting law enforcement assistance to address student behavior is considered a last resort. They should also emphasize that schools must provide accommodations to disabled students as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Policies should make clear that the outlined restrictions to calling the police do not apply to situations involving adults in or near school grounds, including staff.

When deciding whether a situation rises to the level of police involvement, school administrators should consider factors including these:

- The student's age, developmental needs, or known trauma history.
- Whether the behavior is related to a student's disability.
- The severity of the alleged behavior and the degree of harm to people in the school, including students and staff members.
- The perspective of any harmed students.

School officials should resolve less serious student conduct issues that occur at school using promising alternative discipline tactics that do not rely on suspensions and expulsion. They should do so whether the issue takes place at school, at off-campus school-sanctioned events, or on school buses.

Examples of conduct issues that should never warrant police involvement should be identified in district policies, and may include, but are not limited to the following:

- Vandalism and graffiti.
- Insubordination.
- Disturbances (including disturbing school statutes) or disruptive behavior (such as running, shouting, noise, and profanity).
- Dress-code violations, cell phone use violations (including posting a video of a fight), and any other school disciplinary violations that are not criminal offenses.
- Use or possession of controlled substances such as marijuana, cannabis, alcohol, tobacco, and nicotine products.
- Threats of harm which, in context, are clearly metaphorical (such as “I’m going to beat you up”).
- Any physical violence and fighting, such as pushing, hitting, or shoving, which does not result in injury requiring medical attention.
- Any name-calling, slurs, bullying, and other verbal harassment that do not present any risk of serious physical harm.
- Mutually voluntary sexual behavior among peers of the same age.
- Losing or damaging school property.
- Taking or attempting to take another student or school staff’s property without their permission.
- Truancy or tardiness.
- Forgery.
- Trespassing.
- Loitering.

SCHOOL POLICIES SHOULD MANDATE THAT PARENTS ARE NOTIFIED AND PRESENT

District policies should also define the procedures to be used when calling the police, including the circumstances under which a student is to be informed of their right to remain silent. Policies should also govern the circumstances in which police or probation officers can conduct investigatory detentions.[117] Investigatory detentions occur when school-based police remove students from their classrooms and ask them questions that could lead to school discipline or criminal consequences for a student. They can create a power imbalance if students think they cannot leave and are unaware of the serious potential consequences of their interview. School policies should mandate that parents are notified and present before any police officer is allowed to question a student.

Except in emergencies involving a serious threat to school safety or imminent risk of serious physical harm to students or to staff that school administrators cannot resolve, districts should also require staff to receive approval from the school principal before reporting a student to law enforcement. To encourage greater accountability and fewer referrals to law enforcement, staff who summon police or who report a student to police should be required to promptly document why police response was necessary (for more on reporting requirements, see page 22).

SCHOOL OFFICIALS SHOULD RESOLVE LESS SERIOUS STUDENT CONDUCT ISSUES THAT OCCUR AT SCHOOL WITHOUT POLICE

4. Repeal laws that require school administrators to call the police for minor student misbehavior.

Because of legal barriers, some schools cannot use district policies to limit certain instances in which staff call police. Many states have laws requiring a designated school district employee to notify law enforcement of any student behavior that violates a state's criminal code,[118] which may include laws explicitly criminalizing student conduct like disrupting a class.[119] Other state laws require school staff to notify law enforcement for specific conduct issues, such as alcohol possession or property damage.[120]

State lawmakers should repeal laws that require school employees to call the police in response to behaviors that do not pose a threat to school safety, so that school staff can address student conduct issues with internal disciplinary procedures and appropriate interventions. Some state legislatures have also implemented reforms to prevent schools from referring students to police for certain low-level issues. For example, Illinois has prohibited schools from notifying police when students miss school[121] and from contacting police to remove "disruptive students."[122] And Virginia has removed language from the state code that educators said contributed to increasing the number of referrals; many believed it obliged them to report any potential crime, including a possible misdemeanor.[123]

5. Decriminalize truancy, curfew violations, and other status offenses.

Police responses to student conduct issues are supported in part by laws that criminalize certain nonviolent adolescent behaviors that would be legal for adults. Known as "status offenses," these behaviors include missing school (truancy), curfew violations, and causing disorder or a disruption in school. For example, 14% of students arrested in Maryland's public schools during the 2017–2018 academic year were arrested for "disruption."[124]

State policymakers should revise their statutes with an aim of eliminating these status offenses. Some behaviors that fall into status offense laws reflect real issues that should be addressed. Studies show, for example, that truancy is correlated with lower grades, increased likelihood of dropping out of high school and increased likelihood of future contact with law enforcement.[125] But arresting the student is an inequitable and counterproductive response to such behavior. Research has suggested, for example, that arrests for truancy do not have any effect on increasing school attendance, improving educational attainment, or reducing the likelihood of future lawbreaking.[126]

Status offense laws are disproportionately applied to Black children[127] and their parents, and carry grave consequences, including arrest, incarceration, or deportation. In 2011, Black children were 269% more likely to be arrested for violating curfew laws (which have been shown to have no effect on reducing crime[128]) than White children were.[129] And while approximately half of states have laws prohibiting the use of detention or incarceration for status offenses, probation acts as a loophole. When children are on probation, they can be detained or incarcerated for status offenses in the majority of states. Nationwide, an estimated 16.4% of children detained (that is, incarcerated) on any given day in 2019 were there because they broke a status offense rule.[130]

6. Decriminalize consensual "sexting" between teenagers of similar ages.

A 2018 meta-analysis found that 14% of teenagers have sent peer-to-peer consensual nude or semi-nude photos or videos of themselves.[131] Despite the prevalence of sexting, many states still use child pornography laws to prosecute teenagers for consensual sexting with same-age peers.[132] Pediatricians have argued that consensual teen-to-teen sexting is a health and education issue, rather than a law enforcement issue.[133] And the U.S. Department of Education has advised school districts to address sexting as part of comprehensive Internet safety education.[134] State policymakers should revise these laws to prevent the criminalization of this behavior.



End surveillance strategies

Students feel safest when they are not subjected to intrusive and unnecessary monitoring and surveillance. The use of certain surveillance policies, practices, and technologies in K-12 schools has grown in recent decades: In the 2003–2004 school year, for example, 36% of schools reported using security cameras,[135] compared to 91% in 2019–2020.[136] In addition to cameras, surveillance of K-12 students can include subjecting them to random drug tests and searches, drug-sniffing dogs, maintaining databases of student information, wand sweeps, metal detectors, and remote monitoring of school-owned computers and tablets. Surveillance technologies and services are extremely expensive:[137] U.S. schools and colleges spent roughly $3.1 billion on them in 2021.[138] But little evidence exists on the efficacy of these technologies and services at detecting and preventing violence.[139]

Although schools take surveillance measures with the intention of promoting safety and these measures can have legitimate safety-related uses–such as monitoring the exterior of a building–research has shown that widespread tactics to monitor students are associated with decreased student perceptions of safety[140] and increased rates of discipline.[141] Schools with a majority of non-White students are more likely to use strict surveillance measures than schools with mostly White students, even after accounting for factors that might explain a school's choice to implement surveillance, like school crime or neighborhood crime.[142] A 2021 analysis of more than 6,000 students, for example, found that Black students were four times more likely to attend schools with higher levels of surveillance. After controlling for levels of student misbehavior, the analysis found that students in schools with more surveillance measures were more likely to receive suspensions and less likely to attend college.[143]

Contrary to the goal of producing safety, surveillance measures can undermine students' sense of belonging by communicating to them that they are being watched in a space where they are required to be. A recent qualitative study of averted potential mass shootings at schools concluded that zero tolerance policies, metal detectors, surveillance cameras, SROs, and other law enforcement solutions did not prevent or deter such attacks.[144] Rather, research has consistently shown that preventing such tragedies involves students reporting problematic behavior–and that such a "bystander effect" is facilitated by positive, welcoming school climates.[145]

The following recommendations can reduce reliance on unnecessary surveillance to protect students' privacy and improve overall school climate and school safety.

7. End school-based drug testing and the use of drug-sniffing dogs.

After the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of urine drug testing of certain public employees in 1989,[146] K-12 schools began subjecting students to random drug testing–sometimes as a condition for participating in extracurriculars and sometimes as a condition for just attending school. In 2002, the Court upheld the constitutionality of random drug testing policies in schools.[147] The federal government has funded and provided technical assistance to school districts that adopt these policies.[148] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, by 2016, 38% of U.S. school districts that have middle or high schools had adopted a student drug testing policy.[149]

The American Academy of Pediatrics opposes random school-based drug testing because it does not work:[150] Its benefits for deterring drug use are largely hypothetical.[151] Students with positive test results face serious consequences, including arrest or exclusionary discipline. For example, in 2021–2022, 11% of school-based arrests in Florida were related to drugs,[152] as were 13% of discipline actions in Massachusetts.[153]

Some K-12 districts in the United States use drug-sniffing police dogs, but research and reports have raised serious questions about their accuracy.[154] Available evidence shows a wide range of error rates,[155] and that handler beliefs and cues influence dog outcomes.[156] In addition to accuracy concerns, drug-sniffing dogs–more commonly found at border crossings or in carceral settings–foster cultures of hostile surveillance, which may make students feel scared and threatened rather than supported in a welcoming, positive learning environment.[157]

Investing in counseling for students with substance use disorders may be more effective in reducing drug use than surveillance tactics are. And a 2012 study of adolescents with infrequent substance use found that offering brief professional advice resulted in lower use of alcohol.[158] School-based counselors could use various evidence-based treatment models to provide advice to low-risk students and make counseling available as needed for those who have more serious substance use problems.[159]

INVESTING IN COUNSELING FOR STUDENTS WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS MAY BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING DRUG USE THAN SURVEILLANCE TACTICS ARE

8. Ban facial recognition software in school video surveillance systems.

Though facial recognition technology is unproven as a deterrent to school shootings, in recent years security contractors have marketed the software directly to schools for this purpose.[160] Privacy and civil liberties experts have raised concerns about inaccuracies and the risks to privacy posed by surveillance cameras with facial detection and facial recognition capabilities–risks disparately carried by non-White students.[161] Companies who sell this technology encourage administrators to use the software to identify people who may incite violence at a school, such as a problematic parent or former student. But many school shootings have been caused by current students who are allowed to be on a campus.

As more school districts across the country have invested in this technology,[162] research shows that it has extremely high error rates. A 2018 study found that the software most accurately identifies White men who have light skin, and is most likely to misidentify women and dark-skinned or Black men. These technologies were most likely to misidentify dark-skinned women. Although the error rate for light-skinned males was less than 1%, the software misidentified the gender of dark-skinned women 35% of the time.[163]

In the context of K-12 schools, these disparities could make non-White students even more likely to be the targets of disciplinary action, referrals to law enforcement, and school-based arrests. One facial recognition company has publicly stated that these error rates and proven racial biases would be "hugely problematic" if used to attempt to stop people hypothesized to be potential school shooters and could put innocent students at risk.[164]

The use of facial recognition video surveillance in K-12 schools also raises serious concerns about privacy. Advocates have noted that access to facial recognition data has the potential to be shared among schools, school districts, for-profit software companies, police departments, local, state, or federal agencies and crime databases, and–in some places–immigration enforcement agencies.[165]

THE USE OF FACIAL RECOGNITION VIDEO SURVEILLANCE RAISES SERIOUS CONCERNS ABOUT PRIVACY

9. Ban remote access of cameras and microphones on school-owned tablets and laptops.

COVID-19 accelerated K-12 schools' reliance on technology to facilitate remote or hybrid instruction.[166] For example, the number of K-12 schools that provide tablets, laptops, and Chromebooks to students jumped from 43% to 86% during the pandemic.[167] The expansion of remote learning during the pandemic also spurred the development of new sophisticated types of software that allow schools to monitor and detect students' online activity remotely.

Schools can use this software to collect data on any student's behavior–for example, a learning management system that logs when students use it or a web app scanning the content of students' email. These programs can also allow schools to view browsing histories, monitor social media use, switch tabs, block sites, launch websites, proctor tests, and track students' attention during remote class.[168] In some cases, surveillance software programs grant educators remote control of, and access to, certain functions on a student's device, like its camera and microphone. Beyond the context of remote learning, schools have also implemented surveillance software programs to search for online behavior indicating potential violent tendencies, drug use, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, and pornography use[169] (for more on the inefficiency and potential harmful application of such monitoring, see "Threat Assessment Teams" on page 8).

Surveillance software opens the door to unnecessary punishment, decreases student perceptions of safety, and is not necessary to facilitate remote learning. To ensure students' privacy and limit the role that increased surveillance has on disproportionate discipline and punishment in and potentially outside of schools, districts that choose to use this technology should, at a minimum, do the following:

- Communicate widely to students and parents how devices and data are used and how online monitoring could lead to disciplinary or criminal consequences.
- Ban remote access of cameras and microphones on school-owned technology.
- Mandate information security and privacy training for staff.
- End "privacy-waiving" policies that advise students, implicitly or explicitly, that they have no privacy expectations when using school-owned devices.
- Limit how and when school-owned devices monitor student device use; how and when school-owned devices collect data; and where these data are stored, for how long, and who has access to the data.
- Limit when and how online monitoring can lead to disciplinary or criminal consequences.

End inequitable and harsh school discipline policies

School administrators frequently remove students who misbehave from their learning environment through exclusionary discipline: suspensions and expulsions. During the 2017–2018 school year, for example, approximately 2.5 million K-12 students received at least one out of school suspension, and more than 100,000 students were expelled.[170] Research has shown that exclusionary discipline leads to decreased academic achievement,[171] increases the risk of dropping out,[172] and is correlated with higher likelihood of future involvement in the juvenile legal system.[173] Research has also shown that the negative effects of school discipline experienced by young adults are significantly greater for Black children than for White children.[174]

Racial disparities in exclusionary discipline have been documented for decades and begin as soon as children enter the U.S. public school system.[175] Black preschool students nationwide are expelled at 3.14 times the rate of their White peers and are 3.6 times as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension.[176] Students who are most vulnerable to exclusionary discipline in the earliest years of school continue to be disproportionately suspended or expelled as they progress through grades K-12: One study showed that a single suspension increases a student's likelihood of dropping out from 16% to 32% and substantially increases the likelihood of additional discipline, with each subsequent suspension a student receives further increasing their risk of dropping out.[177]

Disciplinary policies shape overall school climate, a broad concept encompassing the many conditions that influence learning.[178] A positive school climate exists when students are safe from violence or bullying, have support to reach high behavioral and academic standards, and are engaged in respectful and trusting relationships.[179] School climate influences educational outcomes[180] and has a strong relationship to violence in schools. A 2018 meta-analysis, for example, found that school climate factors significantly predicted rates of violence.[181]

A survey of 75,000 students found that in schools with harsh discipline policies, students reported feeling less safe and less connected to their school.[182] And though data on how students of different racial groups experience school climate are limited, a survey in California found that 19% of Black students reported low school connectedness, compared to 8% of White students.[183]

The following recommendations can help schools take the necessary steps to significantly curtail exclusionary discipline and, in turn, facilitate students' feelings of connection to school that are especially important for creating a positive, safe school climate.[184] It is critical that schools seeking to limit the harms of traditional, punitive disciplinary response also evaluate and invest in appropriate alternative supports that reduce the likelihood of student behavioral issues, as described in the subsequent section of this report. To do so, teachers and school staff must be supported with adequate training and resources to make the transition away from punitive responses.

10. End zero tolerance policies.

Zero tolerance policies refer to a wave of school discipline laws in the late 1990s and early 2000s that expanded the list of violations for which students could be suspended or expelled. These policies also imposed harsher consequences for certain violations, such as fighting, weapons, or drugs. Zero tolerance policies were spurred by the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which incentivized states to mandate that local school districts expel–for at least a year–any student who brings a weapon to school.[185] But in districts across the country, zero tolerance policies quickly expanded to encompass many additional behaviors, from fighting to benign, lawful behaviors such as dress code infractions.[186] By 1999, *USA Today* reported that 87% of public schools had a zero tolerance policy requiring suspension or expulsion for all infractions related to alcohol and other drugs, no matter the level of offense.[187] Research has shown that the proliferation of zero tolerance policies directly increased suspension and expulsion rates nationwide, particularly for Black and Latinx students.[188]

Zero tolerance legislation enacted by state legislatures since 2008 has slowed, with a greater number of bills constraining zero tolerance than encouraging it.[189] This legislative shift has been marked by limiting lengths of suspension and expulsion, prohibiting exclusionary discipline in early grades, and requiring consideration of context and student circumstances in disciplinary proceedings.[190] A 2022 report found that the rate of suspensions has decreased since its peak in 2009–2010, but the rate remains higher than in the early 1980s–and educators continue to suspend Black students and disabled students at disproportionately high rates. In 2017–2018, one in eight Black students nationwide, almost one in 11 disabled students, and more than one in four disabled Black boys had received an out-of-school suspension.[191]

11. Remove vague language in school discipline policies and codes of conduct to reduce risk of inequitable application.

School discipline policies and student codes of conduct establish which behaviors students may be disciplined for, and what consequences they may be subject to for particular behaviors. This means that the language in school discipline policies and student codes of conduct–and the language in state laws and regulations that govern them–are critical. Research shows that people are more likely to rely on biases in making decisions when rules and norms are unclear or allow for discretion.[192]

A 2022 report analyzing each state's laws and regulations that govern school discipline policies and student codes of conduct found that nearly all states rely on arbitrary or vague language to define student conduct and consequences, such as "disrupt/disruption/disruptive," "willful/willfully," and "disobey/disobedience/disobedient."[193] Such language is vulnerable to subjective interpretation, biased application, and arbitrary enforcement, even when states attempt to define behavior expectations with laws.

To clarify language, school districts should examine student codes of conduct and identify, replace, and define vague terms. Codes of conduct should list specific prohibited behaviors for students, establish where and when a policy applies, and ensure that specific prohibited behaviors are distinguishable from developmentally appropriate behavior. They should also account for individual circumstances, including a student's knowledge or intent of wrongdoing (or lack thereof), whether the behavior was the result of a disability, and the outcome of the student's behavior (including guidance on when to involve the police, as described on page 9). Policymakers should evaluate current laws and regulations that affect school discipline policies and make similar revisions.

VAGUE LANGUAGE IS VULNERABLE TO SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION, BIASED APPLICATION, AND ARBITRARY ENFORCEMENT

12. Ban corporal punishment in K-12 schools.

Corporal punishment is a deliberate act to cause a student physical pain for the purpose of discipline, and includes inflicting physical force on a student like striking, spanking, or paddling; requiring them to assume a physically painful position; and using chemical sprays, electroshock weapons, or stun guns.[194] More than 69,000 children were physically punished at U.S. public schools during the 2017–2018 school year.[195]

Corporal punishment is banned at schools in most countries, including in all of Europe.[196] In the United States it is banned at military training centers, in most juvenile detention facilities, and cannot be employed as a sentence for a crime.[197] The American Academy of Pediatrics observes that corporal punishment is harmful to child development and does not improve children's behavior,[198] and has long recommended that corporal punishment in schools be abolished by law.[199] However, a 1977 Supreme Court case found corporal punishment constitutional in K-12 public schools[200] and gives states the authority to determine their own laws on physically disciplining students. As a result, corporal punishment is legal at public schools in 19 states[201] and in private schools in 48 states.[202]

Disabled students and Black students are disproportionately subjected to corporal punishment. Disabled students accounted for 19% of all reported students subjected to corporal punishment at school during the 2017–2018 school year.[203] The same data also show that nationwide, Black boys were twice as likely as White boys to be subjected to corporal punishment, and Black girls were 4 times as likely as White girls.[204] One reason Black students are disproportionately subject to corporal punishment is that they are more likely to attend school in states that use corporal punishment extensively.[205] Seven states account for 80% of corporal punishment in the country: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas.[206]

Policymakers should ban corporal punishment where it remains legal or, at a minimum, amend state laws to constrain its use by addressing the disproportionate harm to Black students and disabled students. Tennessee[207] and Louisiana[208] recently amended state laws to limit the use of corporal punishment, specifically against disabled children.[209] Tennessee policymakers also enacted new laws requiring schools to report additional data about their use of corporal punishment, including the reason for each instance of corporal punishment, which could inform future efforts to ban corporal punishment.[210] In the interim, in states where corporal punishment remains legal, school boards can ban corporal punishment in their district. For example, the board of the last remaining district to allow corporal punishment in North Carolina voted to ban the practice in 2018.[211]

19% **OF ALL REPORTED STUDENTS SUBJECTED TO CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AT SCHOOL DURING THE 2017–2018 SCHOOL YEAR WERE DISABLED**

13. Ban seclusion and restraint in K-12 schools.

Disability advocates have long called for a federal ban on seclusion and restraint, noting that these practices are violent, inhumane, cause lasting trauma, and do not effectively meet the needs of a student in crisis.[212] Seclusion refers to the involuntary confinement of a student in a room they are physically prevented from leaving. Restraint encompasses an array of tactics to control a student's movement, including mechanical restraint, including devices such as straps, handcuffs, zip ties, or straightjackets.[213] More than 100,000 children were recorded as being subjected to seclusion or restraint at U.S. public schools during the 2017–2018 school year,[214] an estimate likely to be extremely low, given that a 2019 Government Accountability Office report found significant underreporting of these data.[215] Those data show that school officials and police disproportionately restrain and seclude Black students, disabled students, and boys.[216] For example, though Black students accounted for 15% of the total student population, they represented 23% of students subjected to seclusion.[217] And 78% of students subjected to seclusion were disabled.[218]

These tactics prevent students from feeling that they belong at school and hinder the development of positive, supportive school climates. Although some states strictly limit the use of seclusion and restraint, others place few, if any, restrictions on the practices, and others require no monitoring or oversight.[219]

Except when a student poses an imminent danger of serious physical injury to another person or themself, no student should be subjected to physical restraint by school staff, including school-based police. No student should ever be subjected to mechanical restraints or seclusion. Several states have recently taken measures to limit the use of restraints in schools. In 2021, for example, Illinois passed a bill ending the use of prone restraint (placing students in a facedown position), banning locked seclusion at schools, and limiting the use of any isolated timeout or physical restraint when a student poses an imminent danger of physical harm.[220]



Invest in Public Health Strategies to Create Safe Schools

School safety depends on students having access to the resources they need to thrive. While school-based police focus on responding to problematic behavior after it happens, a comprehensive public health approach to school safety instead aims to preventively address the many factors that contribute to a lack of safety in K-12 schools. Together with ending inequitable and harsh discipline practices and appropriately training teachers to implement new tactics, these strategies can work to create a positive school climate—one where students are engaged in learning, feel they belong, and have trusting relationships.[221]

Many school discipline strategies have shown to be promising alternatives to traditional punitive models. Research on these strategies—like social-emotional learning, restorative justice practices, and trauma-informed school environments—is relatively new, but positive. For example, research has found that developing social-emotional skills early can lead to fewer conduct issues and less bullying in school,[222] as well as improved long-term outcomes related to education, employment, substance use, and contact with the criminal legal system.[223] And some studies suggest that restorative justice programs, when implemented well, are associated with increased academic achievement, improved student behavior, and decreased exclusionary discipline, among other positive outcomes.[224]

School systems nationwide are increasingly adopting these approaches. For example, the School Based Diversion Initiative in Connecticut aims to shift the response to student behavioral health crises from punishment to supportive school- and community-based services, including mobile crisis responses.[225] From 2010 to 2019, on average, participating schools reduced referrals to courts by 29% and increased referrals to mobile crisis services by 55%.[226]

The following recommendations offer a starting point for evaluating evidence-informed public health strategies that can effectively reduce the likelihood of violence and other threats to school safety without reliance on police, surveillance, or harsh discipline tactics. Policymakers and school administrators considering these approaches should do so in close consultation with a broad array of stakeholders—including advocates and experts in racial justice and disability; faculty, staff, and union representatives; and parents, caregivers and other impacted community members. School administrators should be especially guided by the leadership of students most affected by these systems of punishment to understand what makes them feel safe, which resources they would like to be available to them, and how to redirect funding (using tactics like participatory budgeting). Only through such collaboration will schools be able to develop appropriate and effective non-punitive, non-exclusionary approaches to safety.

Schools should also build in robust data collection and evaluation mechanisms—as well as necessary education and support for teachers and staff—as part of implementing any of these practices. This will help ensure that new approaches are meeting their goals of improving school safety and equity, not replicating harms.

14. Explore restorative justice practices.

Restorative justice is a non-punitive approach to improving student behavior and school climate with three core principles: repair harm, involve stakeholders, and transform community relationships.[227] Restorative justice is designed to facilitate mutual understanding, problem-solving, and expressions of remorse and forgiveness. The goal is to promote mutual feelings of respect, peace, and satisfaction.[228] This approach differs from exclusionary discipline because it is based on the idea that students who misbehave break a social contract, and that this contract cannot be restored if the student who broke the contract is absent from school.[229]

International studies have generated a body evidence of positive outcomes for students, teachers, parents, and community members who participate in restorative justice.[230] This practice has been increasingly embraced in the United States, with promising early evidence.[231] A study on the impact of restorative justice in Denver Public Schools–the first of its kind nationwide–showed that systematic implementation of restorative justice at the school and district levels, when combined with reforming discipline policies, was associated with reduced disproportionate discipline outcomes and increased academic achievement.[232] The study found a decrease in the school system's overall suspension rate from 10.6% in 2006 to 5.6% in 2013, with the largest reduction in suspension rates (7.2%) occurring for Black students.[233] In California, an evaluation of Oakland Unified School District's Whole School Restorative Justice Program found that the percentage of participants who were suspended over time dropped by half.[234]

As of 2019, at least 30 states have enacted laws requiring K-12 schools to implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline, including restorative justice. Some of these laws, like in Delaware, require rigorous data collection on student discipline and mandate that schools meeting certain suspension or expulsion thresholds three years in a row "must review their discipline policies, assure proper implementation of restorative justice practices, and submit a corrective plan" to the state's education department.[235]

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IS DESIGNED TO FACILITATE MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING, PROBLEM-SOLVING, AND EXPRESSIONS OF REMORSE AND FORGIVENESS

15. Explore social-emotional learning and trauma-informed school environments to prevent school violence.

School climate can be improved by providing students with an education that promotes social-emotional learning (SEL) and fostering a trauma-informed school environment. SEL is a process by which people acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to understand and manage emotions, feel and show empathy, set and achieve goals, make responsible choices, develop positive relationships, and resolve conflicts.[236] SEL is a trauma-informed approach based on the understanding that all children need to be taught social and emotional skills, and that children impacted by trauma and chronic stress need the most support in this skill development.[237] Trauma-informed school environments, similarly, acknowledge and address the harmful effects of trauma in students' lives.[238] This approach aims to ensure that students affected by trauma feel safe, respected, and supported with appropriate care and resources to reach their full potential.[239]

A strong body of evidence shows that an education that promotes SEL positively impacts a variety of student outcomes. A 2011 meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs involving more than 270,000 K-12 students found that participants showed "significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance."[240] Since then, three other meta-analyses echoed these findings[241] and a 2021 systematic review similarly found that SEL interventions improve participants' social and emotional skills.[242]

Emerging evidence shows the promise of schoolwide approaches to creating trauma-informed educational environments.[243] An academic study of the Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS) program in San Francisco found improvements in students' ability to learn and in attendance, as well as a 32% decrease in total disciplinary referrals and a 43% decrease in incidents involving physical aggression after one year, with greater reductions in subsequent years.[244]

A TRAUMA-INFORMED PROGRAM FOUND A

43% decrease

IN INCIDENTS INVOLVING PHYSICAL AGGRESSION AFTER ONE YEAR, WITH GREATER REDUCTIONS IN SUBSEQUENT YEARS

16. Invest in and train school nurses, counselors, social workers, and psychologists.

Professional standards recommend at least one counselor and one social worker per every 250 students, at least one nurse per every 750 students, and at least one psychologist per every 700 students.[245] Because 70% to 80% of all young people who receive mental health services receive them in school, these staff play a critical role in early detection and care that can prevent mental health conditions and substance use disorders from worsening and reduce future likelihood of mental health crises. Early interventions conducted by comprehensive school-based mental health and substance treatment systems have been associated with improved academic performance,[246] fewer referrals to special education (and fewer students deemed eligible for those programs),[247] fewer disciplinary encounters,[248] and improved graduation rates.[249]

A recent report by the American Civil Liberties Union, however, estimated that 90% of public school students attend schools where the total number of school support staff does not meet professional standards, and that 14 million students attend schools with police officers but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, and/or social worker.[250] And approximately 80% of children and adolescents in the United States with mental health diagnoses have unmet mental health needs and may be at risk of increased victimization, harm to themselves, or behavioral problems that may impact other students' well-being. Exacerbations caused by COVID-19 resulted in pediatric health experts declaring a national emergency in child mental health in 2021.[251]

School districts should reallocate funding to hire and train school nurses, counselors, social workers, and psychologists. Schools should also support the facilitation of culturally competent, effective, and quality mental health care to students once a mental health condition is indicated. Appropriately training school staff and connecting students to community-based care when possible is critical to fostering a sense of safety and trust, so students feel that they can share their problems without fear of reprisal and be met with appropriate help.

Social workers and psychologists have played active roles in upholding white supremacy and furthering systemic racism,[252] and continue to engage in practices that disproportionately harm Black and Latinx communities. For example, the child welfare system is much more likely to take Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children than White children from their parents, and research indicates that racial bias of social workers may play a role in their decisions on whether to remove children from a home.[253] Because mandatory reporting laws that aim to alert authorities to potential child abuse apply to staff in schools,[254] it is essential that counselors, social workers, and other professionals are appropriately trained on the reporting requirements that *do* exist. These requirements may be less rigorous than what staff assume, and they should fulfill them in a way that supports the needs of students and minimizes the risk of unnecessary criminal legal system entanglement.

17. Invest in adequate staff and training to support special education students.

Special education students—and especially Black special education students—are at increased risk of exclusionary discipline and restraints in schools.[255] Investing in teachers, mental health professionals, and other staff who are trained in trauma-informed classroom management and social-emotional learning can help make sure that students are properly screened for disabilities and reduce the documented overidentification and under-identification of Black students in particular disability categories and the harmful consequences that result.[256] A 2014 analysis of national data from tens of thousands of schools, for instance, found that Black students who were categorized as having "emotional disturbance" had a higher suspension rate than most other students.[257] Black disabled students are also more likely than White disabled students to spend time in restrictive settings, away from a general education classroom and their peers.[258]

Proper screening of disabilities increases the likelihood that students receive appropriate support and accommodations, rather than punishment, which can in turn improve school climate and contribute to school safety.[259] Disabled students who remain in general education classrooms with appropriate accommodations have better short- and long-term outcomes than their peers who are placed in separate settings.[260]

PROPER SCREENING OF DISABILITIES INCREASES THE LIKELIHOOD THAT STUDENTS RECEIVE APPROPRIATE SUPPORT AND ACCOMMODATIONS

18. Invest in early literacy.

Children who cannot read proficiently by the fourth grade—when reading becomes necessary to gain information in other subjects—fall further behind every year. By the time a student who misses this milestone reaches ninth grade, they are approximately four times more likely to not graduate high school on time than are proficient readers—a rate that increases to eight times for low-income Black and Latinx children.[261] Data from 2019 show that only 18% of Black fourth graders scored proficient in literacy nationwide, compared to 45% of White fourth graders.[262] And academic disengagement—a natural outcome of not being able to adequately read school materials—leads to truancy more for young Black boys than any other group of students.[263]

To improve student engagement and academic outcomes and foster more supportive, safer school climates, policymakers should prioritize early literacy. Specifically, they should fund school districts' ability to deliver evidence-based approaches to teaching literacy,[264] including evidence-based early literacy screening programs; hire early literacy specialists; and use culturally responsive, grade-appropriate reading materials. In 2022, President Joe Biden launched the National Partnership for Student Success to increase high-quality tutoring and mentoring, and called on communities to use American Rescue Plan funding to address pandemic-related learning gaps, an approach that supports such a goal.[265]



Improve Data Collection and Transparency

Currently, there are no comprehensive, uniform data about school-based police in K-12 schools. Data analysis is a largely underutilized resource that can reveal how police in schools are affecting communities. Collecting complete data on daily interactions between school-based police officers and K-12 students is crucial to understanding and addressing racial inequities in school-based referrals of students to law enforcement. These data–along with data on other components of school safety, like school climate or data on restorative justice practices–are key to ensuring that school safety redesign efforts are effective in reducing disparities and improving overall school safety.

The U.S. Department of Education's mandatory biannual Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) program currently requires K-12 school districts to collect and report the number of students referred to law enforcement, and the number of students arrested for school-related activity. "Referral to law enforcement" is defined as "an action by which a student is reported to any law enforcement agency or official, including a school police unit, for an incident that occurs on school grounds, during school-related events, or while taking school transportation, regardless of whether official action is taken. Citations, tickets, court referrals, and school-related arrests are considered referrals to law enforcement."[266]

But few accountability measures are in place to ensure compliance and accuracy of reported data, and significant undercounts in data have been documented in small and large districts across the country.[267]

Mandating the collection of comprehensive data on daily interactions between police officers and K-12 students can equip school districts, communities, and policymakers with information that can support the redesign of school safety. Policymakers should also designate government bodies–at the state and federal levels–to analyze these data regularly to identify patterns of racial disparity and possible contributing factors.

19. Require school districts to collect and report data on staff-initiated student-police contacts.

For data on student-police contacts to be analyzed to answer questions about racial disparities in referrals to law enforcement, it must include key information about what happened. Understanding the extent to which school staff are initiating referrals of students to law enforcement makes it possible to identify the factors that contribute to racial disparities in student-police interactions. Analyzing staff-initiated police referrals may also make school staff more aware of how often and in what situations they subject students to police contact, and this may reduce their likelihood of outsourcing student discipline issues to law enforcement.

COMPLETE DATA ON DAILY INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SCHOOL-BASED POLICE OFFICERS AND K-12 STUDENTS ARE CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING RACIAL INEQUITIES

In order to be used for detailed analysis, records that schools maintain of student referrals to police should include the following:

- Demographic information of the student referred, including their racial group, gender, grade level, school, specific disability status, and English Language Learner status.
- Whether school-based police, school faculty, staff, an administrator, a student, or someone else initiated the police contact.
- Reason for the police contact.
- Location of the student behavior leading to the police contact (such as on school grounds, during off-campus school activities, school transportation).
- Location of the police contact.

State policymakers can implement legislation mandating that districts collect and publicly report anonymized reports analyzing these data. The federal government can strengthen existing data collection requirements by mandating that the CDRC include these elements and implement measures–such as requiring districts to designate a point of contact–to address misreporting and resolve data issues.[268]

20. Require police to document the outcome of student referrals as well as all investigatory detentions and uses of force.

Police, whether employed by a police department or a school, should record the disposition of any referral that results in their contact with students, such as no action, investigatory detention, citation, ticket, court referral, or arrest.

Police should also record two important measures of their contact with K-12 students: investigatory detentions and uses of force. Police often conduct or assist with investigatory detentions by removing students from their classrooms to ask them questions that could lead to school discipline or criminal consequences. While commonplace, these incidents are not recorded in data. Without data on investigatory detentions, there is no way to assess how often this practice leads to criminal consequences, what racial disparities exist in its application, and the extent to which it contributes to disparities in school discipline and arrests.

Every investigatory detention of a K-12 student by school-based police or resulting from a school staff–initiated referral to law enforcement should be documented by police departments, whether it occurs on school grounds or during off-campus activities. These data should include any instance of a law enforcement officer doing the following:

- Initiating contact with a student and asking the student questions that could lead to school discipline or criminal consequences for the student;
- Being present while a school staff member initiates contact with a student for the purpose of gathering information that could lead to such consequences; and
- Assisting, suggesting, or directing school staff in disciplinary actions.

Similarly, although news articles have documented many instances of police use of force on students,[269] no national data exist on the scope of police use of force in schools. And while corporal punishment and restraint are regularly used in some schools, the lack of comprehensive data means that it is not possible to understand how many of those actions are attributable to police force.

Every use of force against a K-12 student by school-based police, at the direction of police, or resulting from a staff-initiated referral to law enforcement should be documented and publicly reported, whether it occurs on school grounds or during off-campus activities. Police should report any use of force beyond escort techniques used solely for facilitating custody of a compliant student, including any instance of the following:

- Use of hands-on, mechanical, or physical restraint against a student.
- Handcuffing a student.
- The presence or deployment of a police canine near a student.

Conclusion

All students deserve to feel safe—and *be* safe—at school. Schools have an obligation to all students to provide a safe learning environment. Schools must provide reasonable accommodations to disabled students, not punish them for behavior related to their disability. The recommendations in this report offer a variety of ways to improve school safety by removing police officers from schools and replacing ineffective, inequitable systems of punishment with evidence-based strategies that foster healthy child development and positive, welcoming school climates.

Communities and schools that are redesigning school safety can begin by gathering important information, such as: Which students are experiencing exclusionary discipline? Which students are being referred to law enforcement, and by whom? What school-based policing programs and surveillance practices exist that impact these contacts? What policies and laws govern police engagement on school campuses and in discipline policies? And which evidence-based public health strategies should be prioritized for investment to better address the unmet needs of students?

As school officials, parents, school staff, community advocates, elected leaders, police departments, and other stakeholders engage in this process, it is critical that students impacted by exclusionary discipline and punishment–and their families–contribute expertise and leadership. Black students, disabled students, LGBTQ+ students, Indigenous students, Latinx students, and other vulnerable children have long had their safety, well-being, and long-term outcomes negatively affected by tactics that use ineffective and harsh tools in the name of safety. Their unique insights about what makes them safe are necessary to redesign a more expansive, equitable, and effective approach to school safety.

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