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President & CEO

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C., 20510

July 23, 2019

Dear Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, and Members of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs,

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) thanks the Committee for holding the July 25, 2019 hearing, "Examining State and Federal Recommendations for Enhancing School Safety Against Targeted Violence." Safety for every member of a school community is foundational – we cannot achieve the educational objectives that ensure meaningful participation in our democracy without first making sure that all students and educators feel safe and supported in their schools.

For more than 45 years, IDRA has worked to ensure equitable and excellent education opportunities for all students, with a focus on students of color, students from families that are economically disadvantaged, immigrant students, and English learners. We seek to achieve our mission by supporting family engagement and empowerment, producing timely policy analyses, publishing actionable research, and providing practical trainings and materials.

As the Committee considers the research, evidence and expert perspectives on what it takes to keep schools safe, it is critical to thoughtfully consider what "safety" looks like for *all* students. We know that increasing access to counselors, social workers, and other mental and behavioral health professionals creates safer schools. We know that examining and confronting individual and institutional biases, adopting restorative practices, and using multi-tiered systems of support lead to more positive and close-knit campuses. We know that culturally-sustaining curricula, a diverse corps of educators, and meaningful partnerships between schools and communities make students, educators and families feel more connected.

Building trusting relationships and supportive communities is the proactive way to support the mental, emotional and physical safety of students and adults in schools. Indeed, this approach is consistent with the research and recommendations developed by federal agencies on how to prevent targeted school violence.¹

¹ In the 2004 report, [Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates](#), the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education state, "The principal objective of school violence-reduction strategies should be to create cultures and climates of safety, respect and emotional support within educational institutions."

Yet, following violent tragedies in schools, policymakers and school administrators face significant pressure to respond in ways that are contrary to what we know works. Often, some of the initial responses to targeted violence are to dramatically increase the presence of police or other armed personnel, take a zero-tolerance approach to student behaviors, or purchase unnecessary and ineffective equipment to surveil and track students and “harden” school buildings. These approaches are short-sighted and reactionary and compromise school safety. They do not address the underlying needs of students and adults. Rather, they fracture important relationships and force certain student populations to bear the brunt of negative outcomes.

School Safety and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

For decades, researchers, families, and advocates have examined and documented the “school-to-prison pipeline” – the process by which schools push students out of their classrooms through the use of exclusionary discipline and school-based policing. Students who are punished or criminalized in their schools are more likely to be held back, drop out of school, and have contact with the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. They are more likely to disengage from school and may struggle to build meaningful relationships with their peers and adults on campus. **Perhaps most tragically, many students have an underlying need that will continue to go unaddressed when schools rely on punishments rather than services and supports to respond to perceived misbehaviors.**

It is well-documented that some groups of students are more likely to be punished and criminalized in their schools than others. Black students are suspended, expelled and policed at disproportionately high rates, even though they are not more likely to misbehave than their peers.² Similarly, Latino students are over-disciplined in many schools across the country.³ Students with disabilities are punished more than their non-disabled peers⁴ despite laws that require certain protections. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) and gender non-conforming students are also unfairly targeted and punished in their schools.⁵

The approaches that funnel students into the school-to-prison pipeline also create unsafe and unsupportive campus climates and, paradoxically, are the very same approaches that school districts often adopt in response to incidents of targeted school violence. The result is an ineffective cycle of harm that negatively impacts campuses and makes violence more difficult to prevent. These negative impacts are most felt by certain, already-vulnerable student populations.

For example, research suggests that schools that rely heavily on exclusionary discipline also receive less positive campus climate ratings and have lower overall academic achievement,

² Skiba, R.J., & Williams, N.T. (2014). [Are Black Kids Worse? Myths and Facts about Racial Differences in Behavior](#). The Equity Project at Indiana University.

³ NCLR. (2011). [School-to-Prison Pipeline: Zero Tolerance for Latino Youth](#). National Council of La Raza.

⁴ Fabelo, T., et al. (2011). [Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement](#). Council of State Governments Justice Center and The Public Policy Research Institute, Texas A&M University.

⁵ Himmelstein, K., & Brückner, H. (2010). [Criminal Justice and School Sanctions Against Nonheterosexual Youth: A National Longitudinal Study](#). Pediatrics.

even among the students who are not suspended or expelled.⁶ Administrators and educators who rely on exclusion often fail to adopt the strategies and use the personnel that support campus success, resulting in missed opportunities to build relationships and understand community needs.

When schools push students away, rather than pull them in closer, they fail to address underlying issues. When adults do not have the tools to effectively manage classrooms and support learning, their needs also go unaddressed. The result is a school in which no person is getting the support they need, problems are being ignored, and members of the community are being excluded, punished and criminalized. Unstable environments like this make everyone less safe.

As another example, an analysis of data from schools across the country showed that **following high-profile incidents of school violence, school districts were most likely to place extreme and unnecessary school hardening, policing and surveillance measures in schools with the largest proportions of students of color, even when they were not the schools and communities where violence had occurred.**⁷

School hardening, policing and surveillance measures have *not* been shown to increase school safety. Students and adults in schools that adopt these measures report feeling *less* safe, with campuses that are more like high-security facilities than supportive learning environments.⁸ There is no reliable research that shows that the presence of police officers prevents school violence, rather research shows that when police are present in a school they are more likely to get involved in routine discipline issues,⁹ resulting in an unnecessary increase in arrests, tickets, and use of force incidents. Similarly, extreme surveillance measures have not proven effective¹⁰ and can result in the unnecessary targeting and tracking of students. These “school safety” efforts can actually compromise the safety of students, especially those who are already more likely to have unnecessary contact with unnecessary and extreme security and policing measures in their schools.

Recommendations for Ensuring Safe Schools for All Students

As the Committee considers recommendations for enhancing school safety, we respectfully urge members to do the following:

- Take a research- and prevention-based approach to addressing targeted school violence. Our time, energy and resources should focus on implementing proven strategies, like restorative practices and increasing access to important school-based personnel, services and supports that can help to build and sustain positive school climates.

⁶ Skiba, R., et al. (2006). [Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations](#). American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force.

⁷ Nance, J.P. (2017). [Student Surveillance, Racial Inequalities, and Implicit Racial Bias](#). Emory Law Journal.

⁸ See NASP. (2018). [School Security Measures and Their Impact on Students](#). National Association of School Psychologists.

⁹ Nance, J.P. (2016). [Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#). University of Florida Levin College of Law.

¹⁰ Patel, F., et al. (2019). [School Surveillance Zone](#). Brennan Center for Justice.

- Consider all possible outcomes of any safety recommendations. Preventing targeted school violence means fostering safe and supportive schools for all students. An increased police presence and the use of exclusionary discipline disproportionately and negatively impact specific student populations and are untenable and ineffective.
- Ensure that surveillance and data collection are limited and observe the privacy rights of students. Databases that track students based on characteristics like race, mental health diagnosis, or sexual orientation threaten the safety of individual students and serve no real schoolwide safety purpose.
- Consider the oft-ignored expertise of students. IDRA works closely with students to support their involvement in research and advocacy. As we develop our policy positions, we look to young people to more fully understand the impact of policies and practices on all student groups.¹¹ The students with whom we work are organized, thoughtful and passionate about creating safe and supportive schools for everyone. They emphasize the importance of recognizing and meeting the needs of all students and have an important part to play in any conversation about school safety.

We thank you again for your attention to the important issue of school safety. We look forward to working with the Committee.

Sincerely,

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The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent, non-profit organization, led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.

¹¹ For more information about student activism around issues like school safety and access to equitable education opportunities, see [IDRA's resources online](#).