



Listening Session on Federal Relief: The Next Steps for our Children, Teachers, and Parents in Uvalde

Testimony by Morgan Craven, J.D., IDRA National Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement Presented before the U.S. Congressional Children's Caucus, September 26, 2022

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Jackson Lee, Congressman Castro, Caucus Members, and members of the Uvalde community.

My name is Morgan Craven, I am the National Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement at IDRA, a national non-profit organization based in San Antonio. In addition to education research and policy advocacy, IDRA provides training and support to students, educators, school leaders, families, and education agencies in 11 southern states and Washington, D.C.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. This is obviously a very difficult, yet critically important listening session, and I look forward to speaking with you and hearing from you about what it takes to create safer schools for every student, every day. I come to you today with my experience as an attorney who represented students disciplined in their schools; as a policy advocate who has focused on school safety, discipline, and policing practices for the past 10 years; and as a parent of two Black and Latino children whose safety, happiness, and wellbeing I think about constantly.

When horrific tragedies like school shootings happen, I know we are all considering what we can do to better protect our young people and ensure schools are safe. That is why we have listening sessions like this one. When we think about those policies and practices that increase school safety, we have to think not only about safety from specific, targeted acts of violence, but also what safe and supportive schools look like every single day for every single student.

There is a lot of alignment in the approaches that create consistently strong school climates for all students and those that decrease the likelihood of school violence. Many of the strategies that help young people feel they are an important part of a community, that help teachers feel prepared to recognize and address students' needs, and that make all families feel connected to their children's education every day are the very same strategies that can help us to proactively recognize and respond to issues before they become more serious safety concerns.

To be clear, there is no single answer to achieving school safety, including when it comes to targeted violence. Rather, in order to see the supportive schools, we want for our

children *and* decrease the likelihood of violence in our schools, we must invest in a number of strategies—an ecosystem of support. And we must resist the urge to rely on the approaches that may, for some, feel right in the moment but will ultimately cause harm and create school environments that compromise the physical and social-emotional safety of young people.

Part of that ecosystem certainly involves gun violence prevention and mental and behavioral health care for everyone. We know that gun violence is the leading cause of death for children and teenagers in this country. And, there are escalating and unaddressed health concerns for young people, including trauma and social isolation, that must be addressed. We cannot expect to achieve school safety and support students the way we need to without fully confronting those two issues.

We also cannot expect to achieve safe and supportive schools for all students if we adopt some of the approaches that we often hear policymakers and others call for in response to specific acts of school violence.

We have already heard calls to increase school-based police, create overly-surveilled schools, and increase harsh discipline practices that suspend, corporally punish, or expel children or put them into alternative school programs, even for behaviors that could and should be handled by educators and administrators in schools. These punitive approaches are common responses, among some, to violence in schools even though there is no evidence that they make schools safer.

These approaches may create a false sense of immediate security for a few but are not backed by research and can actually create less safe school environments overall, particularly for those students who are disproportionately impacted by them.

What we know is that many parents, students, and teachers report that punitive schools make them feel *less* safe. When campuses become environments that center punishment, students may be afraid to talk to adults, afraid to report concerns about a classmate, afraid to seek help, and afraid to talk about what they have heard or seen in their communities that may need an adult's attention. This can make it less likely that students will report potential violence *and* can create school climates that are not conducive to the learning and relationship building that are key to every student's success and safety.

Overly-punitive strategies can push young people *out* of school communities and isolate them, sometimes when they most need to be pulled in. Punitive discipline and school-based policing can compromise students' academic success and increase the likelihood they will experience grade retention, drop out of high school before graduating, and have contact with the criminal legal system. What some view as a solution to targeted school violence can actually create large-scale and long-term issues that compromise overall

wellbeing in our schools and communities.

And worse, the well-documented academic, social, physical, and psychological harms of these harmful proposals fall disproportionately on Black students, on Latino students, on other students of color, on students with disabilities, and on LGBTQ+ youth.

One study found that, following high-profile incidents of school violence, police presence and other surveillance measures (like metal detectors and cameras) increase in the schools that serve primarily students of color—even controlling for levels of reported crime at the school and in the surrounding community. This means that many young people are bearing the brunt of bad policy responses simply because of what they look like, not because of any real safety concern or likelihood of committing a violent act.

These harsh approaches not only endanger the wellbeing of young people, but they create a dangerous façade of security, to the detriment of real safety. Importantly, if we put our energy and resources into what doesn't work, we fail to invest in what does.

Instead of creating highly punitive and policed schools as some policymakers have been calling for, we must invest in supports for individual students and teachers, including diverse and well-trained school-based mental and behavioral health professionals who can recognize and respond to students' and teachers' needs.

We must support the implementation of programs like restorative practices and social-emotional supports that improve school climates, provide meaningful consequences for challenging behaviors, and help young people relate to each other and their environments in a healthy way.

We must give schools tools and hold them accountable for appropriate and consistent responses to bullying and harassment so that harmful behaviors stop and no student feels they are without protection when they walk onto their campus.

We must adopt meaningful consequences to students' and adults' challenging behaviors; and we must promote strategies that allow for relationship-building in a school community. Experts—even those who approach school safety from very different vantage points and ideologies—note that this relationship-building is key to building stronger schools and identifying and responding to challenging behaviors.

And I know that many of those approaches already have the support of this community. What has been so clear to all of us is that Uvalde parents, teachers, and students are invested in their schools and have worked hard to develop a community of care. Good and effective programs and approaches must continue, must develop, and must receive support from our policymakers as part of the larger safety investment we make for our students.

It bears repeating that this investment in safety requires us to adopt meaningful reforms that reduce the presence of weapons in our schools and communities; implement appropriate physical security measures on campuses; and address trauma, isolation, and mental and behavioral health needs on a large scale.

I want to end by sharing some student perspectives on the question of school safety. My organization, IDRA, has a youth advisory board comprised of 10 amazing high school students who help us to develop and understand the impact of our policy positions.

I spoke with these students about school safety, and they were very clear: more guns in their communities, more police in their schools, and more discipline that targets and excludes young people will not make them safe. They specifically said that those approaches make them feel more anxiety and more panic, even when they are told they are in place for their “security.”

Students are asking for their schools to be responsive when they report that they’ve been bullied or harassed. They are asking for investments in counselors and social workers who have the time to support their needs. They are asking for classrooms where they feel they can be themselves and see themselves as they learn. They are asking for diverse educators who are not armed with weapons but are empowered to teach with empathy and care.

And they are right. That is what real school safety should look like, and that is what we must try as hard as we can to achieve for every student, every day. Thank you so much.

For resources and references related to the information above, please see the attached issue brief, [What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students](#).

To connect with our advocacy community across the U.S. South, please join our [Southern Education Equity Network](#) (SEEN); find information about training and resources for schools at the [IDRA EAC-South](#); and access culturally-sustaining teaching materials on our [We All Belong – School Resource Hub](#).

IDRA 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.