



Issue Brief

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What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student

A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students

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We are saddened by instances of violence in our schools and communities. But we are also more determined than ever to make sure safe, supportive and welcoming schools are a reality for every young person. Our vision for school safety ensures all members of a school community are safe from physical, social-emotional and cultural violence.

We must enact effective measures at every level to protect students from horrific acts of physical violence, like school shootings. As we do so, we must also ensure our students feel safe every day, in every way, by adopting practices that have been shown to promote safe and welcoming schools and do not compromise the overall well-being of young people.

Students must be able to enter their classrooms and not experience bullying or harassment from their teachers or fellow students. Young people should feel comfortable speaking with adults about challenges they or their peers are experiencing and know they will be met with support, not suspicion or suspension. Students must be able to access the health professionals they need in school, rather than encounter school-based police officers. They must be able to freely express every aspect of their identities and see themselves in school curricula that affirm their cultures and places in history and our world. Schools must be places of learning and love, not violence of any form.

It takes a multi-pronged effort, focused on relationship building, prevention and inclusion, to achieve this vision of safe schools for all.

There are other important steps we must take to ensure schools are safe from social-emotional, cultural and other forms of physical violence. No one step is designed to work alone, rather we must address the interconnected policies, practices, beliefs and systems that too often threaten the safety of young people in schools.

Schools should use research-based strategies to be both preventative and responsive, focusing on community building, identifying needs and issues, and responding to conflict and harm fairly and proactively.

To ensure the success of schoolwide programs, all educators, staff and administrators must **be trained to recognize and respond to the needs of members of the campus community**, including the needs of students and adults. These include fundamental needs like proper nutrition, medical care and other services that can impact how people enter into and engage with others in their environment.

They also include the need for **protection from abuses like bullying and harassment**, which schools have a duty to investigate and address. Unfortunately, many students experience bullying and harassment, sometimes based on their race or ethnicity, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation and/or religion. In 2019, about 22% of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied at school, and around 16% of 9-12th grade students reported being electronically bullied (Irwin, et al., 2021). On a personal level, individual students may feel fearful and unsafe when their schools fail to respond. This can impact entire school climates, creating cultures where adults are sanctioning harmful and discriminatory behaviors – the opposite of the safe school communities we need for our students.

Administrators, teachers and other school staff must be prepared to address bullying and harassment quickly and appropriately in order to cultivate the safe schools we want for all students (IDRA, 2022c).

Staff must also be prepared to recognize and respond to trauma, grief, anger, social isolation and the need for behavioral and mental health support. Schools and districts can help by identifying the services in their communities that are available for students, families and staff and by building partnerships to easily and quickly connect members of their community to those services. States must provide resources to schools to do this important work, including resources to ensure all campuses have enough diverse, well-trained counselors, social workers and other health professionals.

Investing resources in counselors, social workers and other professionals will help schools to identify and respond to critical needs and will lead to improvements in student achievement, attendance and overall school climate (Lapan, et al., 2012). The recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1 (ASCA, nd). Yet, many schools are failing to meet that recommendation and provide students and adults with the professional support they need. For example, the states with the highest student-to-school counselor ratios in 2020-21 were Arizona with a ratio of 716:1, Illinois with 665:1, and Michigan with 638:1 (ASCA, 2022). New Hampshire and Vermont were the only states in the country that met the recommended ratio of 250:1 (ASCA, 2022). This is particularly true in schools that serve mainly students of color, where student-to-counselor ratios tend to be higher (NCES, 2019).

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Barriers on the Road to Safer Schools

Sadly, some of the common responses to school shootings are not only ineffective but may create unsafe and unwelcoming environments for students. As we envision what we do want in schools, we must also be clear about the barriers to our vision of safe and supportive schools for all young people.

We do not need police and other extreme and unnecessary security and surveillance measures in our schools. School-based police officers have not been shown to make schools safer or protect from school violence. In fact, they can undermine student success and feelings of safety by criminalizing students and destabilizing school climates. Studies show that higher arrest rates of students, especially of Black students, were associated with a

police presence in schools, as were higher suspension, expulsion, and absenteeism rates (Homer & Fisher, 2019). One study found a 6% increase in exclusionary discipline rates, with a disproportionate increase for Latino and Black students, and students from families with limited incomes, following an increase in resources for school policing programs (Weisburst, 2018).

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Research also shows that students' attendance and academic performance – including high school graduation and college enrollment – can be negatively impacted by police presence and increased investments in school police programs (Gottlieb & Wilson, 2019; Weisburst, 2018). Additionally, students can experience physical harm and trauma due to violent interactions with law enforcement officers who are able to use tasers, pepper spray, and other weapons and force – nearly 200 incidents have been tracked across the country since 2007, and certainly many more go unreported (Alliance for Educational Justice, 2022).

A recent study showed the impact that police contact can have on children and instances of childhood trauma. The study noted that “for many children and youth – especially those from communities of color – interactions with police and law enforcement officers constitute an ‘adverse police contact,’ which [is defined] as a source of physical and emotional harm that may have long-lasting effects” (St. John, et al., 2022).

This increased contact pushes students into the school-to-prison pipeline and exposes them to a host of issues that erect barriers to their success, like grade retention, missed classroom time, contact with the juvenile and adult criminal legal systems and attrition (Gottfredson, et al., 2020; Nance, 2016; Ryan, et al., 2018).

When policymakers and school administrators invest in law enforcement programs, there may be fewer resources for the school personnel and programs that work to protect students and increase safety. Sadly, 1.6 million students attend schools with a police officer, but with no school counselor (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019; Whitaker, et al., 2019).

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Because Black students, other students of color, LGBTQ+ youth and students with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by the presence of school police, they bear the brunt of the harmful effects of what some policymakers propose as a school “safety” intervention. National data show that Black students, in particular, are more likely than their peers to be arrested and referred to law enforcement in their schools, despite not being more likely to break school rules. In the 2017-18 school year, Black students accounted for 32% of reported arrests in U.S. schools, though they only made up 15% of the total student population (CRDC, 2021).

Following high-profile school shootings, 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 (Anderson, 2016; Nance, 2017).

Schools with populations made up of more than 50% students of color are two to 18 times more likely to use a combination of “safety” tactics like metal detectors, locked entrances, school police and security guards, and random security sweeps, compared to schools where students of color made up fewer than 20% of the student body (Anderson, 2016; Nance, 2017). This means that increasing law enforcement as a response to school violence is often a policy decision based on the race of the students in the school, not on real safety concerns at a campus.

This so-called “safety” response actually compromises the safety of Black students, other students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students. While we certainly want a swift and appropriate response to violence when it occurs in our schools and communities, that response cannot threaten the daily safety of our students. A regular police presence in schools is ineffective, unnecessary, and can lead to the targeting of Black and brown students, LGBTQ+ youth, and young people with disabilities.

Similarly, we do not need more weapons, inappropriate “school hardening” measures or intrusive surveillance programs in our schools. Arming teachers and other school personnel, erecting excessive barriers in schools, tracking and creating databases of students for the purpose of monitoring certain characteristics or behaviors are all responses that can harm students, compromise their safety and privacy, and destabilize school climates (Coalition Letter, 2021).

One study of 133 school shootings between 1980 and 2019 found that the presence of armed school personnel did not deter violence or reduce injuries, and in fact was associated with increased casualties in the school (Peterson, et al., 2021). Our vision of schools that are safe for all children cannot include school-based law enforcement, extreme school hardening measures or inappropriate surveillance tactics.

We cannot rely on exclusionary and other punitive discipline measures to address student behaviors. In the wake of school violence, some policymakers call for an increase in punitive and exclusionary discipline, including suspensions, expulsions and alternative school placements. They reason that cracking down on students early will help to prevent violence later. This is wrong.

We know these discipline practices harm students, not only in the long term, but also with more immediate effects, including missed classroom learning time, lower graduation rates, missed socialization opportunities with teachers and peers, trauma, and feelings of mistrust and detachment from school (IDRA, 2020; Solís, 2021). Pushing students out of school through exclusionary discipline models poor conflict resolution, creates cultures of exclusion rather than inclusivity and disconnects students from the programs and adults who may be able to help them with any underlying issues that could be manifesting as behavioral challenges.

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For example, suspending a student who is bullying others because they are experiencing problems in their home life does nothing to help the student or address the bullying behavior. Instead, a suspension could make a challenging home life even worse and break important bonds between the student and their peers and other adults in a school. Ignoring students and pushing them away does not solve problems, it can create or worsen them.

Additionally, relying on exclusionary discipline as a school safety response wholly ignores the inherent discrimination that occurs in punitive school discipline systems. Some groups of students are disproportionately subjected to nearly all forms of punitive and exclusionary discipline. For example, students with disabilities are disproportionately punished, even though they may need different or additional support to ensure their success. Similarly, LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately punished, an indication not of their behavior but of adult bias enabled by policy and school practice.

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Black students and other students of color are more likely than their peers to be punished even though they are not more likely to break school rules. In 2017-18, Black students in this country accounted for 38% of out-of-school suspensions (one or more), though they only made up 15% of the student population (OCR, 2021).

Responses to safety concerns cannot target students for punishment or school exclusion or call for an increase in discriminatory systems of discipline. This is the antithesis of safety in every sense.

At IDRA, we are committed to taking action with, and on behalf of all students, especially those who are the victims of violence every day in their schools and communities. Students and families have been a guiding light and a central voice in our work to build safe and supportive schools. To connect with our advocacy community across the U.S. South, visit our [IDRA SEEN – Southern Education Equity Network](#) website; get information about training and resources for schools at <https://www.idra.org/support>; and access culturally-sustaining teaching materials on our [IDRA SEEN School Resource Hub](#).

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