

**School Leaders Doing the  
Work the Right Way:**

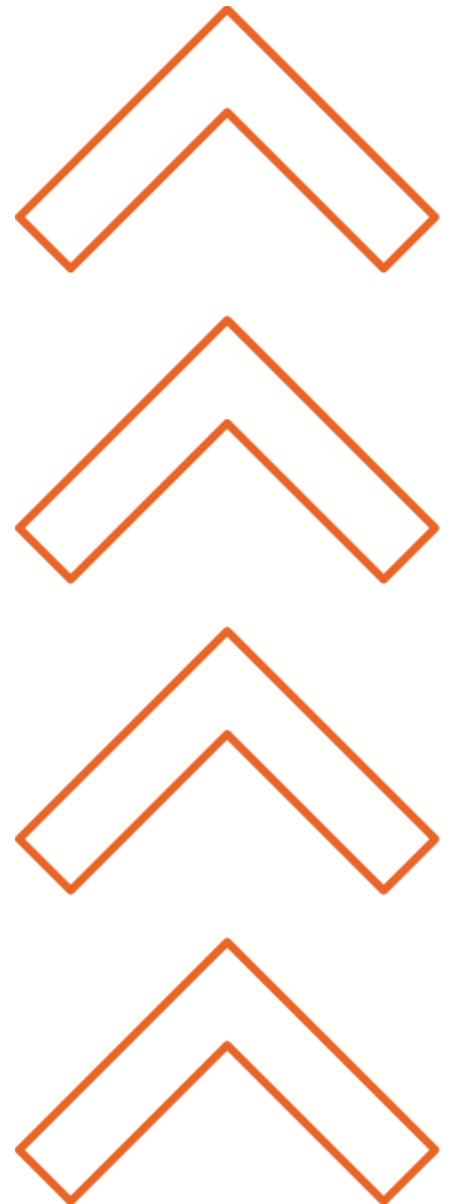
**Building Walls Between  
Schools and the  
Justice System**

**OVERVIEW/SUMMARY: HOW SCHOOLS  
CAN DISRUPT THE SCHOOL-TO-  
PRISON PIPELINE: FIVE DISTRICT  
PROFILES**



AASA, the School Superintendents Association, profiled five school districts during the 2021-2022 school year that are building walls between schools and the justice system, engaging in restorative practices, working to eliminate bias and disproportionality, and providing all children with fair and equitable access to high-quality opportunities. Districts profiled were Aldine Independent School District, Houston, Texas; Brownsville Area School District, Pa.; St. Louis Public Schools, Mo.; Phoenix Union High School District, Ariz.; and Riverhead Central School District, N.Y. AASA sought districts that worked intentionally to reduce school-related juvenile justice interactions where the superintendent and school system played a key role in changes to limit youth interaction with law enforcement, school-based arrests and juvenile justice. AASA created five district profiles and this summary profile of the districts' work to reduce school-related juvenile justice interactions. This project was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. AASA thanks the foundation for its support, while acknowledging that the findings and conclusions presented in these profiles are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the foundation.

District profiles were created following a two-step interview process with districts. The initial brief interview was typically held with the superintendent and an assistant superintendent. This call was designed to provide districts with more information about the project and their participation. It was also an opportunity for AASA to "scratch the surface" and learn more about what the districts were doing to create barriers between schools and the justice system. After the brief call, a longer (60 minutes) call was scheduled with the superintendent and district team charged with this work. Team size varied according to the size of the district, but no one person was solely responsible for the work – it's clear that it takes a committed team to make the kind of lasting changes to policies, practices and culture in a district.





These profiles may challenge many beliefs about how districts manage their discipline procedures. For instance, St. Louis, a large, urban, predominantly Black district, does not have school resource officers (SROs). The district has its own police force instead of a contractual agreement with the city police department or another law enforcement authority. Following the death of George Floyd, Phoenix Union HSD, another large, urban district, chose not to renew its SRO contract, opting instead to enlist the community in creating solutions for school safety.

Each district profiled noted the impact that COVID-19 had on its efforts. While time out of school due to the pandemic posed challenges for everyone, it also provided districts with opportunities to make bold moves, such as fully embracing social, emotional learning (SEL) and enhancing mental health supports for students. The pandemic provided districts with new funding to create and enhance innovative programs to better support students upon return to in-person learning. They also gained even greater understanding of the need to address the underlying causes of students' behaviors BEFORE they become a problem, providing all students with access to SEL and counselors so that underlying traumas are recognized and addressed before students get into trouble – in or outside of school. Districts noted that efforts begun prior to COVID-19 did suffer from the time away, but many saw a faster return to pre-pandemic behaviors because of the changes they'd made prior to school shutdown, notably Aldine ISD.

Districts face complex challenges as they strive to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Riverhead Central School District on Long Island, N.Y, is charged with educating students from three police jurisdictions. This complicates matters when a student has been arrested because the district has to deal with the different policies and procedures of each jurisdiction. Additionally, there is a heavy police presence in the district as a New York State police barracks is located there as well. Students in Phoenix Union must follow the protocols set by the local police, but also follow strict state guidelines for certain juvenile offenses. Brownsville Area School District is very small with a local police force that's active one day a week. The state police oftentimes step in to handle problems in the absence of local police. Similar to Phoenix Union, St. Louis is impacted by state laws. Missouri allows for open carry of guns, a law that may better address the needs of the state's rural residents but complicates situations in urban St. Louis, which already has a high crime rate. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution or blueprint for districts to follow when creating a plan to prevent student involvement with the justice system.

Each of the districts profiled share common characteristics, including support from the school board, superintendent and staff at all levels. Change doesn't sit in any one department alone but is necessary across the district and at all levels. The work is data-driven as the data tells the story of the impact of disproportionality for Black and Brown students. Solutions are varied and creative, as everything from an overhaul of the code of conduct to the elimination of SRO contracts can have a positive impact on students, keeping them out of the justice system and in school, learning and ultimately graduating ready for college, career or military service.



PHOENIX  
**PXU**  
UNION



RIVERHEAD CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Integrity • Creativity • Respect

