# Safe Schools, Thriving Students

## What We Know About Creating
## Safe and Supportive Schools

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# Executive Summary

A rise in the number of school shootings over time has driven increasing attention to school safety. However, school shootings are not the only physical safety threat students may encounter at school. Other types of violence include sexual assault, robbery, physical attack or fights, and threats of physical attack (with or without a weapon). In addition to immediate physical harms, school violence can have long-lasting effects that undermine students' engagement and mental health. It can also increase drug use and risk of suicide. Although there is widespread agreement that all children and youth deserve a safe and healthy school environment, there is significant debate about how best to promote student safety.

As states, districts, and schools consider policies and practices that will promote school safety, they can look to existing research to understand more about the effectiveness of proposed strategies and the potential risk of unintended consequences. Although this report summarizes what is known about the prevalence and effectiveness of strategies to improve student safety in schools, we acknowledge that schools are not the only place where young people experience violence, and there is much to be done to ensure safety in all homes and social spaces.

## Key Findings

There are two common approaches to improving school safety: increasing security and building supportive school communities.

### Strategies intended to increase physical security

Strategies to increase physical security have grown in use over time; however, the evidence base for some of these strategies is not robust.

- **Controlling access to the building and badging staff and visitors** in order to identify adults who have legitimate access to the school building has become common practice within schools. In 2019–20, almost all schools controlled access to building during school hours and required visitors to sign in and wear badges, and 77% required staff to wear badges. There are no studies of the impact of these measures on school safety, perhaps due to the prevalence of these practices in other spaces and the relatively low cost of enacting these policies.

- **Security cameras** are used by the vast majority of schools (91% in 2019–20), but there is no evidence that security cameras improve school safety. The one study that examined the impact of implementing security cameras on school safety found security cameras were not associated with reduced crime or social disturbance.

- **Metal detectors** have been proposed as a school safety measure; however, they are relatively rare in school settings: Only 3% of schools used them daily in 2020, perhaps because they come with a hefty price tag for equipment and staff. Existing evidence is sparse and does not provide support for expanding use of metal detectors. Of the two studies examining the relationship between metal detectors and school safety, one found reports of fewer weapons being carried to school; however, neither found that the presence of metal detectors reduced the number of reported threats, physical

fights, or student victimization in school. A few studies have found that metal detectors are not always effective in detecting weapons and are associated with lower perceptions of school safety among students.

- **School resource officers** (SROs) are sworn law enforcement officers with arrest powers who work in school settings: In 2019–20, 68% of middle schools and 71% of high schools had SROs who routinely carried a weapon in school. Studies have found that the presence of school resource officers has limited effects on school safety and can lead to negative student outcomes. The largest, most rigorous study of school resource officers found that their presence increased the number of weapons detected and decreased the number of fights within schools but had no effect on gun-related incidents. However, the presence of SROs, on average, increased the numbers of suspensions, expulsions, police referrals, and student arrests—all of which can have a long-term negative impact on students by increasing disengagement, dropout rates, and incarceration rates. These negative impacts were consistently larger for Black students and students with disabilities, which suggests that the use of SROs has the potential to expand gaps in educational opportunity and attainment. Research examining the implementation of school resource officers provides some clues to help explain why their presence can lead to unintended negative outcomes for students. These include lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities and lack of training on how to effectively engage with students. Involvement of school resource officers in everyday school discipline is associated with weakened relationships between students and teachers and increased severity of punishment against students.

- **Arming school staff** has been proposed as a method of protecting students from mass shootings. There is no evidence that arming staff in K–12 schools is effective in improving school safety, and one study of school shootings found that the presence of an armed guard was associated with an increase in the number of casualties. Over the past 5 years, almost 100 incidents of accidental discharges of guns in schools have been reported, some of which have resulted in death or injury to students or staff.

## Strategies to build supportive school communities

There is a growing interest in improving school safety by building supportive school communities to protect against the perpetration of school violence.

- **Mental health supports** have been shown to benefit students and schools. Multiple studies have found that counselors can reduce disciplinary incidents and disciplinary recidivism, improve teachers' perceptions of school climate and student behavior, and increase academic achievement, especially for boys. School-based mental health services for students with clinical diagnoses can be effective in improving students' mental health. However, schools' abilities to provide needed support is strained. On average, public schools have only 1 counselor for every 450 students and only 1 school psychologist for every 1,160 students. Only 42% of schools offer mental health treatment services.

- **Social and emotional learning** is the process through which people acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve goals, demonstrate empathy, develop supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions. In 2021–22, approximately three fourths of schools used a social and emotional learning program

or curriculum. A large body of research on social and emotional learning programs finds that they help promote the development of social and emotional competencies; reduce behavior problems and emotional distress; increase rates of prosocial behavior; improve relationships with others; and increase student engagement and achievement. Surveys also suggest that high schools' promotion of social and emotional skills is positively associated with students feelings of safety.

- **Restorative practices**—an alternative to exclusionary discipline practices—build community and teach strategies for resolving conflict. Studies of restorative practices and programs consistently find that they improve school safety, reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, decrease rates of student misbehavior, and improve school climate. A 2023 study found that high rates of student exposure to restorative practices at school also increased achievement and reduced mental health challenges. While 60% of schools reported using some form of restorative practices in 2019–20, studies confirm implementation challenges that require more intensive investments in professional development.

- **Structures that support positive developmental relationships** within schools include small learning communities, advisory systems, block scheduling, looping (keeping the same teacher with a group of students for multiple years), smaller class sizes, and school–family connections. Multiple studies have found that positive, stable relationships between students and staff throughout the school can help prevent physical violence and bullying. A major national study of more than 36,000 secondary students found that school connectedness was the strongest protective factor against school absenteeism, substance abuse, and violence. Another study found that positive relationships significantly enhanced the odds of students communicating potential threats to adults.

## Recommendations for Policy and Practice

States and school districts have an opportunity to foster safer schools and adopt research-backed supports and interventions to address students' mental health and well-being. The research suggests the following investments can help support school safety:

- **Increase student access to mental health and counseling resources.** States and districts can allocate Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) and federal COVID-19 recovery funds, as well as other federal, state, and local funds, to hire more school counselors and other mental health professionals and make plans now to maintain those staffing levels when one-time funds expire. They can also invest in external partnerships with community mental health providers, who can provide school-based or telehealth services for students.

- **Invest in integrated student support systems and community schools to connect students and families to needed supports.** Integrated student supports that address physical and mental health, as well as social service needs, help create a personalized, systemic approach to supporting students. For state and district leaders, this means adopting and supporting comprehensive, multi-tiered systems of support, which provide students with universal supports for their well-being (such as advisories and social-emotional learning programs that support relationships) and include a well-designed system for adding more intensive, individualized interventions (such as counseling, tutoring, or specific services) as needed. Community schools integrate by design a range of supports and opportunities for students, families, and the community to promote students' physical, social, emotional, and academic well-being.

- **Adopt structures and practices that foster strong relationships.** At the school and district levels, leaders can adopt structures and practices (e.g., advisories, small learning communities, looping, allocated time to create strong school–family connections) that foster secure relationships and provide teachers time to know their students and their families well. State and district leaders can further support relationship-centered school designs by removing impediments to these structures and practices that can exist within traditional staffing allocations, schedules, and collective bargaining agreements. They can also provide time, funding, and support for schools to implement advisories and other relationship-centered school designs that promote learning and development.

- **Invest in restorative practices and social and emotional learning.** School, district, and state leaders can support young people in learning key skills and developing responsibility for themselves and their communities by replacing zero-tolerance school discipline policies with policies focused on explicit teaching of social-emotional strategies and restorative discipline practices.

- **Prepare all school staff to better support student well-being.** All adults working in schools need preparation and support to consistently support students' social and emotional development, develop positive relationships, recognize students in need of greater mental health support, and enact restorative practices. States can support professional learning around student safety and well-being through revisions to educator preparation program approval standards, licensure standard competencies, and in-service professional learning and development. Additionally, states can establish guidance for the appropriate use of school mental health staff, paraprofessionals, and other school staff, as well as criteria for hiring, training, and continuous evaluation of their performance and roles. In schools employing school resource officers or law enforcement personnel, school and district leaders should ensure they have clearly defined responsibilities, avoid engagement in daily discipline, and have the training and support necessary to effectively support students.

- **Incorporate measures of school safety and student well-being in state and federal data collection.** While there are many efforts to collect school safety data, existing sources only provide pieces of the school safety picture. A federally driven, systematic data collection that provides more detailed data on safety measures (e.g., roles of school resource officers), strategies to build supportive school communities, and educator practices that support positive school climate and student well-being by the federal government could give researchers and policymakers a more complete understanding of what schools are doing to create safe and supportive learning environments.

- **Conduct equity reviews of school safety measures and their impact on discipline outcomes.** Research has found that some efforts to improve school safety, such as the hiring of school resource officers, are sensitive to bias, particularly toward Black students and students with disabilities. To identify bias in implementation, schools, districts, and states can review disciplinary action data to track whether school safety measures are associated with increased use of exclusionary discipline and police referrals, particularly for Black students and students with disabilities. States and districts can also support schools in conducting equity reviews to track whether school safety measures have unintended consequences for students.

# Introduction

On May 24, 2022, 19 children and 2 teachers were killed in a shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX. Tragically, the mass shooting in Uvalde was one of 304 school shooting incidents in 2022, which collectively left 282 individuals dead or wounded. As of July 2023, there had been 188 school shootings, in which 152 individuals had been killed or wounded. Altogether, there have been more than 2,000 school shootings in the United States since 1970.[1] One study estimates that in the 2018–19 school year alone, more than 100,000 children attended a school at which a shooting took place.[2] Almost every school now prepares for this type of event. In 2019–20, 96% of schools had written procedures for active shooter crises, and 98% conducted lockdown drills with students.[3]

School shootings are not the only violence students may encounter at school. However, unlike school shootings, the overall rate of violent incidents within schools has declined by about 20% over the last decade. The School Survey on Crime and Safety has tracked school-level data on crime and safety since 1999–2000, at which time 88% of schools reported that at least one violent incident took place at school during that school year. Violent incidents include sexual assault, robbery, physical attack or fights (with or without a weapon), and threat of physical attack (with or without a weapon). Two decades later, in 2019–20, 70% of schools reported that at least one violent incident took place at school. While violence was more prevalent at the secondary school level, it occurred at all school levels, with over half of elementary schools having reported at least one violent incident.[4] And while overall rates of victimization within schools are low (approximately 1% of students), in 2019–20, students ages 12 to 18 were more likely to report experiencing nonfatal victimization—including theft and assaults—*at school* than *away from school*.[5]

Perpetrators of school violence come from within and outside of the school. For instance, data examining all school shootings show that perpetrators include students, staff, relatives, students from another school, former students, and those not associated with the school.[6] Multiple studies have examined the factors that place students at risk of perpetrating violence. Studies examining mass shootings, school shootings, and other school violence align in finding a common set of risk factors among perpetrators, including childhood trauma, mental health concerns, and prior perpetration of violence.[7] As an example, more than 90% of school shootings have been perpetrated by current or former students who experienced negative home and school lives.[8] According to research on mass shootings in the United States since 1966, mass shooters consistently experienced early childhood trauma, and studies have found that the majority of school shooters had a history of suicide attempts or other symptoms of extreme depression or desperation. Eighty-seven percent of school shooting perpetrators left behind evidence that they were victims of severe bullying within the school, and many had a history of behavioral issues that were answered with punitive measures such as suspension, expulsion, and interactions with law enforcement.[9]

In addition to immediate physical harms, school violence can have long-lasting effects that undermine students' engagement and mental health. It can also increase drug use and risk of suicide.[10] School violence also negatively affects teachers, reducing their self-efficacy, professional engagement,[11] and retention.[12] In schools that have experienced a shooting, research has found an increase in absenteeism and the likelihood of being retained in grade and a decrease in the likelihood of graduation and college enrollment.[13]

There is widespread agreement that all children and youth deserve a safe and healthy school environment. As Congress considered legislation to improve school safety after the Uvalde shooting, proposals included a wide variety of measures, such as restricting access to school campuses, hiring additional school resource officers, arming teachers, increasing access to mental health services, and teaching social-emotional skills. On June 25, 2022, Congress passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA), which includes measures and resources to increase gun safety, fund school violence prevention efforts, increase school-based mental health access, improve school climate, and increase school attachment and engagement.[14]

As states, districts, and schools consider policies and practices that will promote school safety, they can look to the evidence base to understand what is known about the benefits and risks of different strategies. This report summarizes what is known about the prevalence and effectiveness of strategies to improve student safety in schools.

We acknowledge the limitations of this scope. Schools are not the only place where young people experience violence, including gun violence, and there is much to be done to ensure safety in all social spaces. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, firearms are now the leading cause of death for children under the age of 18 in the United States, a trend largely driven by a spike in gun homicides.[15] Further, strategies in the control of schools are not the only mechanisms for improving the safety of young people. For instance, some consider curbing access to firearms a critical part of stopping school shootings,[16] citing the prevalence of guns in the United States (the United States has less than 5% of the world's population but represents 46% of the world's civilian-owned guns and has 31% of the world's mass shooters) and the success of countries that enacted gun restrictions after mass shootings and saw homicide rates drop.[17]

However, this report intentionally focuses solely on strategies that districts and schools can adopt to address school safety—a topic about which there is significant debate. This report addresses key strategies that are intended to improve school safety through two primary mechanisms: increasing security and building supportive communities.

# Strategies Intended to Increase Physical Security

After episodes of school violence, there are often calls to "harden" school buildings (e.g., restrict building access, install metal detectors, add armed security, and arm teachers) to protect students and staff. As the frequency of school shootings has increased over the past 2 decades, so has the use of strategies for physically securing school campuses (see Figure 1). However, research suggests that using these strategies does not ensure school safety.

## Figure 1. Physical Security Measures Over Time, 1999–2000 and 2019–20
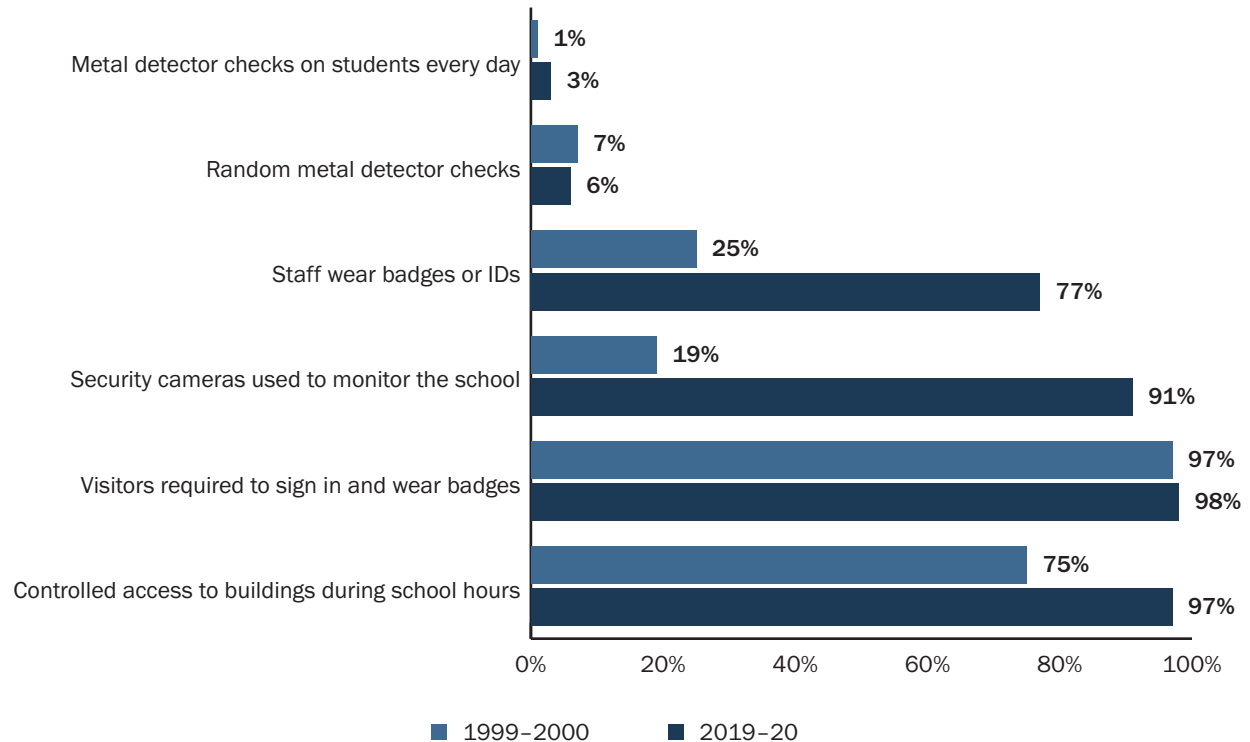


Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Studies. (2021). *Digest of education statistics. Table 233.50. Percentage of public schools with various safety and security measures: Selected years, 1999–2000 through 2019–20.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_233.50.asp

## Building Access and Badging

Controlling access to the building and badging staff and visitors in order to identify adults who have legitimate access to the school building have become relatively common practices within schools. In 2019–20, almost all schools controlled access to buildings during school hours and required visitors to sign in and wear badges. Overall, 77% of schools required staff to wear badges. This practice was more common in elementary schools (83%) than middle (78%) or high schools (65%).[18] There are no studies of the impact of these measures on school safety, perhaps due to the prevalence of these practices in other spaces and the relatively low cost of enacting these policies.

# School Security Devices

## Security cameras

Use of security cameras has increased substantially over time. Security cameras are generally used to deter crime and to capture video evidence of crime that does occur. High schools are more likely to use security cameras (97%) than elementary (88%) and middle schools (94%).[19] There is little evidence on the impact of security cameras on school safety. The one study that examined the impact of implementing security cameras on school safety found security cameras were not associated with reduced crime or social disturbance.[20]

## Metal detectors

Metal detectors are proposed as a school safety measure due to their visibility and perceived ability to prevent weapons from being brought into the school building. Their use in schools is relatively rare, with only 3% of schools reporting a requirement for students to pass through a metal detector each day and 6% of schools conducting random metal detector checks of students. High schools are far more likely to use metal detectors than elementary and middle schools, where use is less frequent.[21]

Existing evidence is sparse and does not provide support for expanding use of metal detectors. A comprehensive review of the literature identified only two studies that examined the impact of metal detectors on violence-related behavior.[22] Both studies relied on survey data, and neither used methods that allow for causal interpretation of findings. Of the two studies examining the relationship between metal detectors and reported violence-related behaviors, one study of New York City high school students found a relationship between the presence of metal detectors in schools and reduced rates of students reporting carrying weapons to school, but no relationship between the presence of metal detectors and the number of threats or physical fights. The second study drew on national survey data and found no relationship between metal detectors and student reports of victimization.[23]

A few studies have examined the relationship between use of metal detectors and other visible security measures on perceptions of student safety, though they also do not use methods that allow for causal interpretation. These studies find that metal detectors are associated with decreased perceptions of school safety among students (e.g., increased perception of school disorder and increased use of strategies to protect oneself from violence).[24]

In addition, research has found that metal detectors are not always effective in screening for weapons in schools, which may be because school personnel sometimes lack the training to correctly use and maintain metal detectors and because metal detectors cannot discriminate between weapons and other pieces of metal.[25]

Employing walk-through metal detectors in schools comes with a hefty price tag, including the initial cost (approximately $4,000–$5,000 per unit), ongoing maintenance and repairs, and personnel to operate the machines. One budget analysis estimated that operating each machine would require two or three trained security personnel—at a minimum cost of $37,000 per person (in 2022 dollars).[26] Schools must also consider the significant time investment required to screen students and visitors every morning, particularly in schools with large student populations.

# School Resource Officers

A school resource officer (SRO) is a sworn law enforcement officer with arrest powers who works, either full- or part-time, in a school setting. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers, these personnel are intended to play a tripartite role that includes law enforcement, informal mentoring, and public safety teaching (e.g., gang prevention, anti-bullying, and driving safety). They are also meant to promote a positive image of law enforcement to students and the school community.[27]

The prevalence of school resource officers has increased over time, in part due to federal funding initiatives such as the Community Oriented Policing Service (COPS) grant program, which provides funding to police departments to place officers in schools, making them "free" to schools.[28] In 2019–20, 41% of elementary schools, 68% of middle schools, and 71% of high schools had a school resource officer who routinely carried a firearm working at the school.[29] While school resource officers have become a common school safety strategy, research shows that their presence has limited effects on school safety and can lead to negative student outcomes, particularly for Black students and students with disabilities.[30] Given that the use of SROs frequently leads to negative outcomes for students, with limited improvements in school safety, existing evidence does not support expanded use of school resource officers.

> While school resource officers have become a common school safety strategy, research shows that their presence has limited effects on school safety and can lead to negative student outcomes, particularly for Black students and students with disabilities.
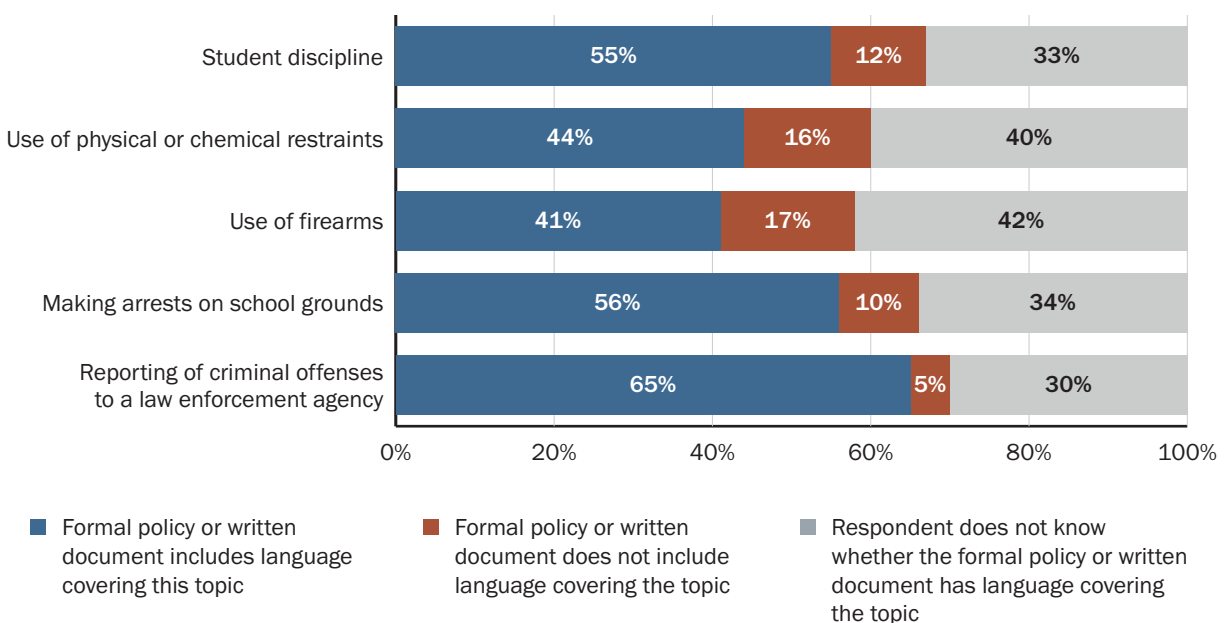
A 2023 national study that included 3,443 schools examined the impact of school resource officers on a range of school safety indicators and student outcomes. This study overcomes some of the threats to validity and generalizability that earlier studies faced due to difficulties identifying whether a school actually received a school resource officer or effectively controlling for prior safety within the school. This study used a rigorous research design that included a strong comparison group, which generates strong evidence that the differences in outcomes can be attributed to the impact of additional school resource officers.[31]

The national study found that school resource officers led to an increase in the number of weapons detected in a school and a reduction in the number of fights and threats. However, they did not lower rates of gun-related incidents.[32]

The study also identified negative effects from having a school resource officer. The presence of school resource officers led to an increase in the rate of suspensions, expulsions, police referrals, and student arrests—all of which are associated with long-term negative impacts on students. For instance, suspension is linked to lower academic achievement and decreased rates of high school graduation and college enrollment. Further, these effects are found to be consistently and significantly larger for Black students (relative to white students) and for students with disabilities (relative to students who do not have a disability), and largest for students who are Black and have a disability. This suggests that the use of school resource officers has the potential to expand gaps in educational opportunity and attainment.[33]

Research examining the implementation of school resource officers provides some clues to help explain why their presence can create these unintended negative outcomes for students: lack of clear roles and responsibilities, how schools use school resource officers, and lack of training. A 2005 study conducted for the National Institute of Justice found that a frequent mistake made by school resource officer programs is that they lack a detailed written definition of the roles and responsibilities of officers.[34] In 2017–18, only two thirds of schools that assigned a school resource officer had a policy outlining the officer's roles and responsibilities. Even in schools that reported having a policy, about a third of principals were unaware whether that policy covered important topics such as engagement in student discipline and use of firearms (see Figure 2).[35]

## Figure 2. Principals' Knowledge of Roles and Responsibilities Outlined in School Resource Officer Policies in Schools With a Policy



| | Formal policy or written document includes language covering this topic | Formal policy or written document does not include language covering the topic | Respondent does not know whether the formal policy or written document has language covering the topic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Student discipline | 55% | 12% | 33% |
| Use of physical or chemical restraints | 44% | 16% | 40% |
| Use of firearms | 41% | 17% | 42% |
| Making arrests on school grounds | 56% | 10% | 34% |
| Reporting of criminal offenses to a law enforcement agency | 65% | 5% | 30% |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *Policies outlining the role of sworn law enforcement officers in public schools.* https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020027/index.asp

Qualitative studies have identified substantial variability in the amount of time school resource officers spent on broad categories of responsibilities and the specific activities within those categories. For example, one school resource officer in the study spent 100% of their time on law enforcement while another only devoted 20% to law enforcement and spent the majority of their time (70%) teaching classes related to public safety and violence prevention. In some schools, the school resource officers had no role in school discipline, while in others, the SRO wrote discipline reports (which can lead to suspension) for minor infractions such as violating the school's uniform policy by not tucking in a shirt.[36] Analyses of national survey data show that school resource officers assigned to schools with a large percentage of students facing educational disadvantage (lower test scores and college-going rate) and to schools located in communities with higher crime rates were more involved in school discipline than resource

officers in schools with greater educational and social advantage.[37] Involvement of school resource officers in everyday school discipline has been found to lead to weaker relationships between students and teachers and increased severity of punishment against students.[38]

The National Association of School Resource Officers names training as a need of SROs and a best practice of SRO programs.[39] The school resource officer role is intended to have three prongs—law enforcement agent, informal mentor, and public safety teacher. However, before becoming a school resource officer, law enforcement officers are only trained in one of those roles—law enforcement, which does not include training on how to effectively mentor and teach youth. Even when training is provided, it is not necessarily provided prior to an officer working in schools. A study of 19 school resource officer programs found that while all programs had provided some training to officers, few provided training to officers prior to working in a school.[40]

Content of the training that school resource officers receive is also variable. A 2018 survey of school resource officers conducted by *Education Week* found that school resource officers were more likely to have received training on law enforcement techniques, such as responding to active shooters (93%), than in areas focused on the specialized needs of youth, such as child trauma (39%) and working with special education students (39%).[41] (See Figure 3.) Given that students' problem behaviors are often manifestations of typical development or social, emotional, or mental health concerns that require support, it is critical that—if schools use SROs—their training includes these specialized areas in order to avoid criminalizing problem behaviors. Some schools and districts train SROs in restorative practices to allow officers to become part of a schoolwide approach to support students and address behavior through nonexclusionary means.[42]

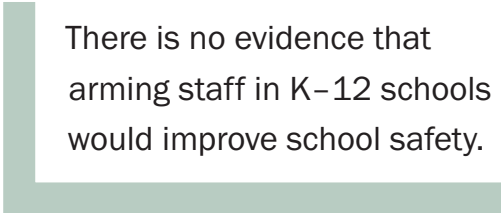## Figure 3. Training Reported by School Resource Officers
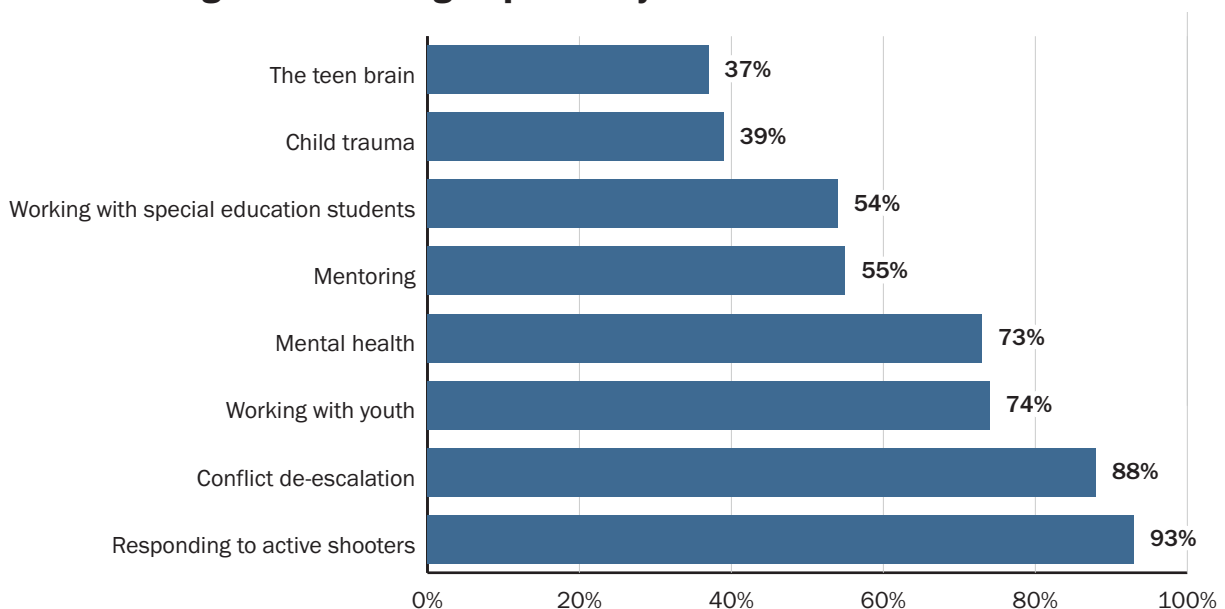


Source: EdWeek Research Center. (2018). *School policing: Results of a national survey of school resource officers.*

# Arming School Staff

In the wake of school shootings over the past decade, some politicians have proposed increasing the presence of police or security officers in schools and arming teachers. As of 2020, 28 states allow schools to arm teachers or staff in at least some circumstances.[43] However, this policy lacks broad public support. A 2018 Gallup Panel survey of teachers found that 73% opposed allowing teachers and other staff to carry guns in schools and 58% said they believed it would make schools less safe.[44] Further, the American Federation of Teachers, National Association of School Resource Officers, National Education Association, and Major Cities Chiefs Association all oppose arming teachers and other school staff.[45]

There is no evidence that arming staff in K–12 schools would improve school safety.[46] The presence of firearms on campus has not been found to improve outcomes during a shooting. An examination of intentional school shootings found that having an armed guard present was not associated with a reduction in the injury rate and was instead significantly associated with an increase in the number of deaths.[47] The Giffords Law Center, which tracks news reports of mishandled and misfired guns in schools, found almost 100 incidents of accidental discharges over the past 5 years and numerous incidents of armed school staff misplacing guns—in bathrooms, locker rooms, or at sporting events—some of which have been found by students.[48] Evidence on firearm deaths outside of schools suggests that having more firearms in schools could be detrimental to student safety. Research shows that most children killed with firearms are shot in their own homes, often due to accidental or negligent discharge of a gun,[49] and that, irrespective of age, access to a firearm triples the rate of death by suicide and doubles the risk of death by homicide.[50]

> There is no evidence that arming staff in K–12 schools would improve school safety.

# Strategies Intended to Build Supportive School Communities

There is a growing interest in improving school safety by focusing on building supportive school communities that are conducive to students feeling a sense of both physical and psychological safety. Multiple studies have examined what places students at risk of perpetrating violence and the factors that protect against school violence. Studies examining mass shootings, school shootings, and school violence align in finding a common set of risk factors among perpetrators. In addition to ready access to guns, these include childhood trauma, mental health concerns, and prior perpetration of violence.[51] In contrast, research identifies empathy, school attachment and belonging, social support, and supportive teacher–student relationships as factors that protect against school violence. As protective factors increase, risk factors decrease. When students feel welcome and connected to their school communities, they have improved mental health, academic, and behavioral outcomes and are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors.[52] As a result, strategies such as mental health support, social and emotional learning, restorative practices, and building positive relationships and school climate are considered part of schools' safety strategies.

## Mental Health Resources and Supports

Research shows that good mental health is key to the success of all children and adolescents in school and life. Mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness; it encompasses overall social, emotional, and behavioral health. Left unaddressed, mental health problems can lead to costly negative outcomes, including academic and behavioral issues, permanently leaving or disengaging from school, and delinquency.[53] The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues and the rate of children's mental health emergencies.[54] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that in 2021 nearly half of high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness and roughly one third experienced poor mental health.[55] Studies estimate that more than half of children with mental health problems have an unmet need for mental health care.[56]

Schools play a key role in providing mental health services to students, and students are more likely to receive mental health services in school than in any other setting.[57] Schools often operate a multi-tiered system of support that provides general support to all students (e.g., bullying prevention or mindfulness training); targeted support to students who are at risk of more serious problems (e.g., mentoring, small group sessions); and intensive support to students with serious and complex challenges or mental health disorders. To provide these supports, schools rely on school counselors and psychologists and community mental health providers.

Mental health supports have been shown to benefit students and schools. Studies have found that counselors reduce disciplinary incidents and disciplinary recidivism, improve teachers' perceptions of school climate and student behavior, and increase boys' academic achievement.[58] A meta-analysis of school-based mental health services in elementary schools found positive effects on students' mental health.[59]

However, schools' ability to provide needed supports is strained. Many students do not have adequate access to school counselors or psychologists. The American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, but nationally, schools average a ratio of 451:1.[60] Students of color and students from low-income families are more likely to bear the brunt of the school counselor shortage. One or both of these student groups have unequal access to school counselors in 38 states. In high schools serving predominantly students of color, school counselors serve 34 more students a year than counselors in schools with fewer students of color.[61]

Similarly, access to mental health services is limited. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 500 students to 1 psychologist, yet in 2020–21, the national average of students to psychologists was 1,162:1.[62] Middle and high schools where Black students comprise the demographic majority are more likely to have law enforcement officers or security guards but not mental health providers.[63]

Likely due in part to insufficient staffing, many schools lack the ability to provide diagnostic mental health assessments to evaluate students for mental health needs. During the 2019–20 school year, only 55% of public schools reported providing diagnostic mental health assessment services and 42% offered mental health treatment services to students. High schools (65%) and middle schools (64%) were more likely to provide these assessments than elementary schools (50%).[64] More than half of schools reported that their ability to provide mental health services to students was limited in a significant way by inadequate funding, while 40% described insufficient access to mental health professionals as a barrier.[65]

## Social and Emotional Learning and Development

Social and emotional learning is the process through which young people acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.[66] Systemic social and emotional learning is a schoolwide strategy to promote a positive school climate and support positive mental health among students. Findings from RAND's School Leader Panel indicate that 81% of elementary schools and 70% of secondary schools used a social and emotional learning program or curriculum in 2021–22.[67]

A 2023 overview of 12 independent meta-analyses on school-based learning programs finds strong evidence that they promote the development of social and emotional competencies; reduce rates of behavior problems, including bullying and aggression; and increase prosocial behavior. These programs can produce additional positive student outcomes that benefit school climate and safety, including reducing emotional distress, improving relationships with others, and increasing students' engagement in learning and academic performance.[68] Another 2023 meta-analysis on universal school-based social and emotional learning programs, published after this review, found similar results, as well as improvement in "school functioning," including academic achievement, study skills, attendance, and on-task behavior.[69] Research also has identified longer-term benefits of social and emotional learning. A meta-analysis that examined the longer-term effects of social and emotional learning—ranging from 6 months to 18 years after the program— found sustained positive impacts on behavioral, mental health, and academic outcomes.[70]

A 2018 survey of current and recent high school students found that students who reported that their schools were strong in promoting social-emotional skills were more likely to say they felt safe in school, in comparison to students who felt their schools were weak at social and emotional learning.[71] Similarly,

in a 2019 nationally representative survey, teachers named social and emotional learning strategies and programs for parents to support students' social-emotional challenges among the top three things that would most improve school safety.[72] In addition, economists have found that the benefits of social and emotional learning programs outweigh their costs.[73]

## Restorative Practices

A restorative approach to discipline is meant to replace punitive and exclusionary discipline approaches, such as suspension and expulsion, with practices that build community and resolve conflict with opportunities to make amends. Exclusionary discipline practices have been shown to be ineffective in improving school safety[74]; harmful to students' academic achievement and attainment[75]; and inequitably applied to students of color, especially Black students, and students with disabilities.[76] Restorative practices are designed to repair relationships when conflict or harm has occurred and to proactively build relationships and community to prevent misbehavior and conflict. Practices like community-building circles, norm-setting, and restorative conferences are intended to encourage students to care about and understand themselves and others, peacefully resolve conflict, make amends when they have caused harm, and reattach to the school community.

> Restorative practices are designed to repair relationships when conflict or harm has occurred and to proactively build relationships and community to prevent misbehavior and conflict.

In 2019–20, 60% of schools reported using some sort of restorative practices. Elementary schools were more likely to report restorative practices (65%) compared to middle (58%) and high schools (52%).[77] Studies of restorative practice programs consistently find that they reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, decrease rates of student misbehavior, and improve school climate.[78] A 2023 study that examined the impact of restorative practices across California middle schools found that schools that increased use of restorative practices saw schoolwide improvements to school climate, student safety, student wellness, student behavior, and student academic achievement. For students, increased exposure to restorative practices was associated with decreased probability and duration of suspension and higher English language arts and mathematics assessment scores. While all students benefited from restorative practices, Black students benefited the most.[79] However, research also suggests that many schools face challenges in implementation, which underscores the need for obtaining staff buy-in, providing sustained training and funding, and understanding that shifting mindsets from traditional discipline to restorative practices requires time and continuous effort.[80]

## Structures That Enable Positive Developmental Relationships

Research from multiple disciplines focused on learning and development demonstrates how positive relationships serve as a foundation for learning, mental health, and emotional wellness. Positive, supportive relationships build strong brain structures and buffer against adverse experiences.[81] Stable, developmental relationships with teachers and other adults are also linked to better school performance and engagement.[82] Research shows that when students feel welcome and connected to their school communities, they have improved academic and mental health outcomes and are less likely to engage in

high-risk behaviors. For instance, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a study of health and well-being among more than 36,000 7th- to 12th-grade students, found that school connectedness proved to be the strongest protective factor to decrease school absenteeism, substance abuse, violence, and risk of unintentional injury (e.g., dangerous driving).[83] Research has found that a stable relationship with at least one caring adult can mediate the effects of serious adversity.[84]

Supportive, relationship-centered learning environments—in which students feel a sense of belonging and where relational trust abounds—are foundational to keeping students safe in school. Positive relationships with students and staff throughout the school can help prevent physical violence and bullying.[85] In addition, positive relationships improve communication, which can help prevent violence. A study on preventing school-based attacks found that students who had prior knowledge of a potential threat were more likely to report that threat if they had positive relationships with one or more adults in the school and felt as though they would be taken seriously.[86] Traditional school designs, particularly at the secondary level, can minimize opportunities to build strong, consistent relationships and put students at risk for becoming disconnected and disengaged, which can lead to decreased safety within schools. Designing more personalized school structures can facilitate the creation of consistent, secure relationships for every child.[87] As outlined in *Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action*, these structures can include:

- **small learning communities**, achieved by creating smaller units or teams in larger schools, which allow educators and students to know each other more fully, work more closely together, build community, and reduce the risk of students falling through the cracks;

- **advisory systems**, in which teachers regularly meet with a small group of students; advise, advocate, and support their academic, social, and emotional development; and build a small community of students to support one another;

- **block scheduling** with fewer, longer class periods to decrease the number of students teachers see each day and allow more time for in-depth teaching and learning;

- **looping**, in which students stay with the same teacher for more than 1 school year to deepen teacher knowledge of students and support consistent relationships with students and families;

- **reduced class sizes** to lower pupil load and give teachers greater capacity to know and understand their students' academic, social, and emotional needs; and

- **stronger school–family connections**, in which time and supports are built in for teachers and administrators to maintain regular exchanges between home and school, plan teacher time for home visits, conduct positive phone calls home, and flexibly schedule school meetings and student-teacher-parent conferences around parents' availability.[88]

There is research on the value of each of these practices in supporting student attendance, engagement, and achievement, but there is currently no systematic, national data collection on the prevalence of these structures.[89]

# Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) and federal COVID-19 relief funds have helped schools to implement school safety strategies and support the mental health and well-being of students. The BSCA, passed by Congress in 2022, includes funding to increase the number of qualified mental health providers in schools with demonstrated needs; train school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers and diversify these professions; improve conditions for student learning, including through evidence-based initiatives to develop positive school climates; and institute school safety measures, support school violence prevention programs, and provide training to school staff and students. Additionally, federal COVID-19 relief funds may be used to support students' social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs, including providing mental health services and hiring additional staff as needed.

With these federal funds, states and school districts have an opportunity to foster safer schools and adopt research-backed supports and interventions to address students' mental health and well-being. The research evidence suggests that investments in increasing students' access to school-based mental health services; adopting restorative practices; supporting social and emotional learning; and developing structures and practices that support the development of positive relationships between educators, students, and families will help promote those goals. Recommendations for how these measures and practices can be implemented in schools, districts, and states follow.

- **Increase student access to mental health and counseling resources.** Mental health professionals and school counselors play a critical role in supporting student well-being and, by extension, school safety. States and districts can allocate BSCA and federal COVID-19 recovery funds, as well as existing federal, state, and local funds,[90] to reduce the ratios of students to school counselors and other mental health professionals in schools, increase their wages, and make plans now to maintain those staffing levels when one-time funds expire. Funds can also be dedicated to supporting the well-being and working conditions of school-based counseling and mental health staff to prevent burnout and attrition.

  Many schools and districts trying to increase access to school-based counselors and mental health professionals have been hindered by a lack of funding for such positions and, more recently, a limited supply of trained professionals. To counter this, some have invested in external partnerships with community mental health providers, who can provide school-based or telehealth services for students. For example, Iowa enacted legislation in 2020 to allow schools to provide behavioral health services to students via telehealth.[91] Arizona is using Project AWARE funds to develop mental health service infrastructure; increase youth, family, and school mental health service engagement; and provide training to increase mental health literacy and reduce the stigmas around it.[92] In 2022, California launched the Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health, investing $4.7 billion to increase access to mental health and substance abuse supports for children, parents, and communities and hire and train 40,000 new mental health professionals.[93] In October 2022, the U.S. Department of Education launched the Mental Health Professional Demonstration Grant Program to encourage innovative district–university partnerships to train more school-based providers.[94]

States and districts can also include mental health, suicide prevention, and trauma-informed practice in existing curriculum, instruction, teacher training, and professional development. Maine now requires its K–12 health curriculum to include mental health and promote its role in student well-being, and several states have adopted suicide prevention policies and partnerships.[95] Texas passed legislation in 2019 that increases mental health training for educators and school staff and requires mental health and suicide prevention curricula within physical health curricula.[96]

- **Invest in integrated student support systems and community schools to connect students and families to needed supports.** Integrated student supports that address physical and mental health, as well as social service needs, help create a personalized, systemic approach to supporting students. For state and district leaders, this means adopting and supporting comprehensive, multi-tiered systems of support, which provide students with universal supports for their well-being (such as advisories and social-emotional learning programs that support relationships), and include a well-designed system for adding more intensive, individualized interventions (such as counseling, tutoring, or specific services) as needed. For example, North Dakota's Multi-Tier System of Supports provides districts with a systemic, integrated framework for providing supports and interventions for students, as well as professional development trainings for developing both academic and behavioral systems of support.[97]

  States and districts can also support and invest in evidence-based community school initiatives. Community schools integrate a range of supports and opportunities for students, families, and the community to promote students' physical, social, emotional, and academic well-being. State support may include adopting legislation and providing funding for community school models and issuing a state board resolution in support of community schools to encourage district uptake of a community schools strategy and help direct funding to support implementation. Community schools funding can include support for dedicated, full-time coordinators—who understand the community and can help manage partnerships, engage students and families, and support collaborative governance structures—in each school or district. For example, in 2021, California increased its already historic investment in the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) to $4.1 billion.[98] The CCSPP supports planning, implementation, and coordination grants for local education agencies and schools with demonstrated need to cover staffing costs; service coordination and provision; community stakeholder engagement; ongoing data collection; and professional training on integrating social and emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, and school-based pupil supports.

- **Adopt structures and practices that foster strong relationships.** At the school and district level, leaders can adopt structures and practices (e.g., advisories, small learning communities, looping, allocated time to create strong school–family connections) that foster secure relationships and provide teachers time to know their students and their families well. State and district leaders can further support relationship-centered school designs by removing impediments to these structures and practices that often exist within traditional staffing allocations, schedules, and collective bargaining agreements. They can also provide time, funding, and support for schools to implement advisories and other relationship-centered school designs that promote learning and development, as well as for resources that help schools develop meaningful school–family–community relationships. For example, Kansas launched the Kansans Can School Redesign Project in 2017 to take a more integrated, personalized approach to student learning, build mutually beneficial partnerships with families and communities, and support schools in developing and implementing redesign plans.[99]

- **Invest in restorative practices and social and emotional learning.** School, district, and state leaders can support young people in learning key skills and developing responsibility for themselves and their community by replacing zero-tolerance school discipline policies with policies focused on explicit teaching of social-emotional strategies and restorative discipline practices. States can provide ongoing funding, training, and guidance for educators on shifting from traditional discipline policies to restorative practices and integrating social and emotional learning into classrooms. They can also establish protocols for when educators should consider restorative practices.

  In 2016, Michigan enacted H.B. 5619, requiring school boards to "consider using restorative practices as an alternative to zero-tolerance policies—such as suspension or expulsion."[100] The act defines the term restorative practices as "practices that emphasize repairing the harm to the victim and the school community caused by a pupil's misconduct" and provides examples of offenses and responses that are inclusive of restorative practices, such as school community mediations and conferences for interpersonal conflict. The Michigan Department of Education provides resources on implementing restorative justice and lists seven factors to consider before issuing a suspension or expulsion.[101]

- **Prepare all school staff to better support student well-being.** All adults working in schools need preparation and support in order to consistently support students' social and emotional development, build positive developmental relationships, recognize students in need of greater mental health support, and enact restorative practices.

  To ensure educators are prepared to support student well-being, states can support professional learning through revisions to educator preparation program approval and licensure standards competencies and in-service professional learning and development. For example, California has transformed its educator certification and preparation program accreditation over the past decade, revising its teacher and leader preparation standards to align more closely with whole child development. Educators are expected to understand how to use restorative practices and "apply knowledge of students, including their prior experiences, interests, and social and emotional learning needs" to develop psychologically safe classrooms and schools."[102] A survey of California administrators found that recently trained principals felt significantly better prepared to support social and emotional learning, create a positive climate, and meet the needs of diverse learners than principals who entered the profession before these reforms.[103]

  Several states have also enacted measures to incorporate whole child practices into professional development. In 2018, Colorado created the Crisis and Suicide Prevention Training Grant Program to provide up to $400,000 in grants per year to schools to provide professional development to teachers, administrators, and school staff on mental health and suicide prevention.[104] Similarly, in 2019, Iowa began requiring school districts to provide annual training on preventing youth suicide, addressing adverse childhood experiences, and recognizing unhealthy stress.[105] Virginia now also requires school staff to complete mental health training in order to receive or renew their licenses.[106]

  Additionally, states can establish guidance for the appropriate use of school mental health staff, paraprofessionals, and other school staff, as well as criteria for hiring, training, and continuous evaluation of their performance and role. In schools with school resource officers, school and district

leaders should ensure they have clearly defined responsibilities that do not include engagement in daily discipline, and have the training and support in child and adolescent development, cultural competence, and restorative practices necessary to effectively support students in positive ways. If schools and districts employ social and emotional learning, restorative justice programs, or other programs to support students' mental and behavioral health, involving all staff in implementation creates coherence and ensures all adults in the building understand how conflicts and behavioral issues can be handled in ways that teach problem-solving skills rather than excluding students. As of 2020, only two states, Maryland and Utah, had explicit provisions for school resource officers to receive training in implicit bias and cultural awareness, respectively.[107]

- **Incorporate measures of school safety and student well-being in state and federal data collection.** Currently, school safety and student well-being data are collected in various ways by districts, states, and the Department of Education, including through the Civil Rights Data Collection, the School Survey on Crime and Safety, state accountability systems, and local school climate surveys. The biennial Civil Rights Data Collection, for example, collects data from schools nationwide on suspensions, expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, arrests, and restraint and exclusion. The nationally representative School Survey on Crime and Safety asks principals to report on issues of crime and discipline, such as violence prevention programs, presence of school security staff, access to mental health services, and staff discipline and safety training. While the data from each of these sources can provide pieces of the school safety picture, a systematic data collection by the federal government that provides more detailed data on safety measures (e.g., roles of school resource officers), strategies to build supportive school communities, and educator practice that supports positive school climate and student well-being could give researchers and policymakers a more complete understanding of what schools are doing to create safe and supportive learning environments. Additionally, more support could be provided to schools and districts to build stronger data collection and reporting systems to increase data reliability and use.

- **Conduct equity reviews of school safety measures and their impact on discipline outcomes.** Research has found that some efforts to improve school safety can trigger harsher and more discriminatory treatment of students. To identify bias in implementation, schools, districts, and states can review disciplinary action data to track whether school safety measures are associated with increased use of exclusionary discipline and police referrals, particularly for Black students and students with disabilities. States and districts can also support schools to conduct equity reviews to track whether school safety measures have unintended consequences for students. For example, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education conducts investigations into schools with high suspension rates and large disparities in suspension and provides technical assistance to these schools to improve their practices.

# Conclusion

All children and youth deserve a safe and healthy school environment in which they can learn and thrive. With a new influx of federal funds, states and school districts have an opportunity to foster safer schools and adopt research-backed supports and interventions to address students' mental health and well-being. The research evidence suggests that investments in increasing student access to school-based mental health services, adopting restorative practices, supporting social and emotional learning, and developing structures and practices that build positive developmental relationships between educators and students will help promote those goals.

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The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.