

A young Black woman with a backpack and a paper bag, smiling as she steps out of a yellow school bus. The background is a solid green color.

CREATING SAFER SCHOOLS:

A CASE STUDY



CREATING SAFER SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

By Dr. Nancy Duchesneau, senior P-12 research associate and Manny Zapata, P-12 intern

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School safety and student well-being are crucial to the social, emotional, and academic development of young people. Simply put, students learn better when they feel safe. Many districts have turned to school security measures that offer visible signs or outward appearances of safety; however, other approaches — those that create positive and inclusive school climates — both support students' well-being and more effectively result in safe learning environments.

This mixed-methods case study examines two urban school districts in the United States. After public calls to end policing in schools, leaders in these districts reformed both policy and practice to support student safety. This study sought to answer the following research questions through interviews, surveys, and in-person observations:

1. How do district and school leaders make decisions about issues related to school safety practices (for example, School Resource Officer (SRO) programs)?
2. What programs, policies, and/or practices are used to support student well-being and school safety in addition to or in place of SRO programs?
3. How do students and school staff understand and experience school safety and well-being?
4. How are students and school staff experiencing changes in school safety practices?
5. What do students and school staff perceive as the policies and/or practices most needed to improve school safety and student well-being?

This report was developed with contributions by Ivy Morgan, Hector Biaggi, and Dr. William Rodick

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although leaders in both districts made reforms to school safety policies, neither district fully removed security personnel or other approaches to physical security. Findings suggest this choice was, in part, due to district leaders' filtering of student and community voices through their own perspectives — including the belief that physical security measures are necessary for school safety. District leaders therefore made efforts to reform policies on physical security but not to remove them entirely, and leaders additionally have supported more evidence-based strategies that emphasize building relationships and creating positive and inclusive school climates (Research Question 1).

As a result, both districts held policies that emphasized physical safety, such as security personnel, metal detectors, and surveillance, and at the same time were working to support school leaders to adopt and implement restorative justice practices, positive behavior incentives, and counseling for students (Research Question 2). Despite district leaders' beliefs that physical security is crucial, only about half of students reported feeling safer with security personnel in schools, and many expressed preferring to speak with another adult in their school instead of security personnel when incidents occur (Research Question 3). School leaders were largely supportive of the reforms made by district leaders but varied in their implementation of the policies, including both security protocols and school climate efforts, based on their own interpretations and resources (Research Question 4).

Although school leaders agreed that relationships lead to deeper understanding of students' experiences and needs, school staff often overestimated their impacts on students' sense of belonging and respect. One factor that may have contributed to this disconnection is that while most staff members reported feeling confident in their use of relationship-building practices in schools, they did not report actually using these practices often. Instead, physical security approaches were pervasive in students' everyday experiences. Student and staff responses made clear that relationship-building practices and policies are most needed to improve learning environments (Research Question 5).

Despite school and district leaders' strong preferences for physical security, research shows that these approaches are not effective at creating safe school environments. Research on workplace and school violence confirms that there's a [path toward an attack](#). It starts with a grievance and escalates until there is an actual breach and assault. Most strategies geared toward hardening schools against these attacks, such as placing police in schools and adding metal detectors, target the *end* of this path — when an attack is ready to occur or already occurring. However, these efforts intervene too late in the pathway, when a situation has already escalated too far. As district and school leaders continue to evaluate and improve on efforts to create safe schools that support student well-being, they must keep in mind the evidence base for existing approaches and work toward a vision of schools where students are physically safe and feel a sense of belonging. Leaning too hard in the direction of physical security without attention to creating inclusive and welcoming environments will undermine efforts to establish safe schools. Research not only attests that strategies to increase physical security do not have the strong impacts hoped for, but it also shows that such strategies can actually *decrease* feelings of safety among students and harm school climate. Furthermore, these [physical security approaches can strengthen the school-to-prison pipeline](#).

The case study in this report suggests that reforms require thoughtful consideration to gain buy-in from all stakeholders and ensure fidelity of implementation. School and district leaders should therefore evaluate where they are in their current policies and practices, and then consider how best to move forward with evidence-based reforms. Specifically, the authors categorize a spectrum of five types of schools. School and district leaders should first consider where their schools stand on that spectrum in terms of its current policies, and leaders should consider next steps to move along the spectrum to the ultimate goal: school-to-possibility pipeline schools.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Additionally, Ed Trust recommends the following steps regardless of where schools or districts fall in this spectrum:

1. Provide clear messaging to principals and school staff on existing policies and implementing reforms.
2. Seek deeper engagement with students and families in decision-making.
3. Strengthen the capacity of adults in schools to build relationships and foster a sense of belonging in students.
4. Hire staff who can support student well-being beyond physical security.



INTRODUCTION

School safety and student well-being are crucial to the social, emotional, and academic development of young people. Simply put, students learn better when they feel safe. Thus, many districts have turned to school security measures that offer visible signs or outward appearances of safety, such as scanners, metal detectors, cameras, and security personnel.¹ However, other approaches that support students' well-being — including bolstering a sense of belonging through building relationships — have been shown to create positive and inclusive school climates that more effectively result in safe learning environments.² Research shows that rather than strengthened school security, student safety and well-being depend on community relationships, high expectations, individualized support, and a safe and supportive school environment that takes into account the cultures and communities of its students.³

Concerns about school safety have [existed for decades](#), with gun violence at the center of the conversation. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic upset the world — and with it our education system. The narrative of safety in schools broadened to include keeping students safe from a pandemic. The sudden rush to support students in virtual environments brought renewed questions about student well-being and what educators could do from a distance to ensure their students were managing the extreme changes and challenges, including changes in routine, forced social isolation, and the death of loved ones. Then, in the same year, tensions rose further when police murdered George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis. Advocates across the country called for scaling back the power of police and instituting alternative reforms to address safety. Schools were brought into these debates, as school resource officers (SROs), sworn law-enforcement officers with arrest power who work in an educational setting, had become increasingly prevalent in schools — especially schools where Black students make up most of the student body.⁴

Despite the Black Lives Matter protests and calls for police reform in response to George Floyd's murder, many district leaders continued to respond to safety concerns about student behavior and external threats with heightened school security. As students returned to in-person learning, concerns about school safety and student behavior rose again, and state and district leaders turned once again to [hardening measures](#). For example, [New York City](#) has seen an increase in policing in schools since students returned to in-person learning after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many district leaders across the country realized a need for other reforms and began considering the elimination of their SRO programs. Attempts to remove SROs were [successful](#) in some places and unsuccessful in others.

Ed Trust sought a fuller view of the possibilities and obstacles to reforming district-level policies and practices to improving school safety and student well-being, and so conducted a study of two school districts that differ both in past SRO programs and current paths to reform. This study sought to understand the decisions behind reforms made by leaders of two large, urban school districts to better support school safety and holistic student well-being, and it aimed to see how, post-reform, these programs currently operate within schools.

Many district leaders across the country have realized a need for other reforms and began considering the elimination of their SRO programs

Ed Trust approached the investigation of these two districts with the following research questions in mind:

1. How do district and school leaders make decisions about issues related to school safety practices (for example, SRO programs)?
2. What programs, policies, and/or practices are used to support student well-being and school safety in addition to or in place of SRO programs?
3. How do students and school staff understand and experience school safety and well-being?
4. How are students and school staff experiencing changes in school safety practices?
5. What do students and school staff perceive as the policies and/or practices most needed to improve school safety and student well-being?

This report highlights findings from a case study of these two districts. These findings and existing research provide a framework with recommendations for other districts seeking to improve their policies for student safety and well-being.

THE DISTRICTS

Both districts in this study are urban school districts in the United States; both serve diverse student populations with a majority of students who are Black, Latino, and/or from low-income households. These districts were chosen in part for their student demographics to understand how students who have disproportionately experienced negative school climates — and have also been most affected by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic — are being served. In addition, Ed Trust selected these districts because of public calls for an end to policing in schools and these district leaders' recent efforts to reform student safety policies and practices. To maintain confidentiality, this guide refers to these districts with the following pseudonyms: Rocket School District (RSD) and Tripp School District (TSD).

Many of the reforms across the two districts are similar; however, there are two notable differences:

- TSD had one form of school security personnel — school police officers; it formally changed the role of school police to school safety officers (SSOs).
- RSD had two different types of school security personnel: school police (SROs), and SSOs. District leaders changed the role and name of SSOs while maintaining the role of school police.

The following table presents the reforms of safety policies and practices of these districts.

Table 1. Safety Policies and Practices in TSD and RSD

	Tripp School District (TSD)	Rocket School District (RSD)
Security personnel in schools	TSD originally had school police who were under the direct supervision of the city’s police department; however, district leaders formally changed this position (and the name) to “school safety officers” (SSOs). These officers now report to school district leadership, but in many cases they are the same personnel who had served as school police.	RSD has both school police (SROs), who report to the city police department, and SSOs, who report to the school district. The district did change the name of the SSOs to reflect changes to their job descriptions, but the personnel did not change. To maintain anonymity of the district, we continue to refer to these personnel as SSOs.
Security uniforms	TSD changed the dress code for SSOs to be less official to ensure they look less like police. SSOs carry handcuffs but not firearms.	RSD did not change the uniform for SROs on school campuses; those personnel continue to work in full police uniforms. District leaders changed the uniforms for SSOs so that these individuals do not resemble police officers.
Security roles	TSD changed the job description for SSOs to explicitly emphasize relationship-building with students and the use of trauma-informed and restorative practices. TSD also banned SSOs from entering classrooms to intervene in regular student code of conduct issues.	RSD made no changes to SRO job descriptions but did change the descriptions for SSOs to emphasize relationship-building with students and the use of trauma-informed and restorative practices.
Security training	TSD changed requirements for SSOs to explicitly require trauma-informed training.	RSD changed requirements for SSOs to explicitly require more comprehensive training through partner organizations to meet the new job expectations and place greater focus on students’ overall well-being.
Diversion program	TSD created a diversion program, an alternative approach to address safety that targets root causes of criminal behavior and offers an “off-ramp” that moves students away from the criminal legal system. This program is intended to decrease the number of school-based incidents that result in criminal justice proceedings.	RSD collaborated with the city police department to create a diversion program to decrease the number of school-based incidents that result in criminal justice proceedings.
Physical security	TSD schools use metal detectors, surveillance, and bag checks at entrances.	RSD schools use metal detectors, surveillance, and bag checks at entrances.
Other reforms	<p>TSD added boxes at school entrances where students can drop banned items, without facing consequences, before crossing metal detectors and bag-scanning.</p> <p>TSD hired dedicated staff responsible for collaborating with school leaders to create a positive, welcoming, and safe learning environment.</p>	<p>RSD began tracking arrests on school grounds by location.</p> <p>RSD created a committee for the oversight of SSOs.</p>

METHODS AND MEASURES

This case study used a mixed-methods approach to understand how district and school leaders made policy decisions and implemented policies and practices to support student safety and well-being. Data collection took place from late 2020 to late 2022 and included the following measures:

Table 2. Measures Used and Data Collected

	Tripp School District (TSD)	Rocket School District (RSD)
Interviews with district leaders to investigate decision-making processes	7 school board members and 8 district administrators	3 district administrators (school board members in RSD did not respond to requests for interviews, so Ed Trust researchers instead analyzed publicly available recordings and transcripts from school board meetings in 2020)
Interviews with principals to investigate their perceptions and experiences with implementing school safety policies and supporting student well-being	3 high school and 2 middle school principals	2 high school and 2 middle school principals
In-person observations to investigate implementation and school climate efforts	2 high schools and 1 middle school	2 high schools and 2 middle schools
Surveys to understand the perceptions of various stakeholders about school climate and their experiences with policies and practices	55 students and 55 school staff*	143 students and 74 school staff

Ed Trust researchers analyzed the data from these measures to answer the research questions stated earlier. Researchers transcribed the interviews and analyzed them for themes predetermined as crucial to the research questions; they then analyzed the data for new themes that emerged through a careful reading of the interviews. In-person observations were coded for visible supports for student safety and well-being as well as visible responses to these supports. Researchers validated the surveys using statistical analyses to ensure questions were reliable, and then the data was analyzed for patterns and relationships. The results of these various measures were also triangulated to ensure that the results of multiple measures informed the overall findings.

* Parents/caregivers were surveyed, but large numbers of invalid responses meant that the data could not be included for reliability and validity reasons.

FINDINGS: DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADER DECISION-MAKING ABOUT SCHOOL SAFETY AND STUDENT WELL-BEING

DISTRICT LEADERS FILTER COMMUNITY VOICES THROUGH THEIR OWN PERSPECTIVES

It is important to note that school safety and student well-being were already top priorities for district leaders before the broader movement to defund and abolish police gained traction after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of sworn police officers. The school-to-prison pipeline was receiving attention well before 2020, and [national organizations](#) as well as policymakers, including leaders in the two districts discussed in this report, were making efforts to disrupt the pipeline and its negative impacts. Some reforms in RSD and TSD were therefore already underway, but after George Floyd's murder, communities in both districts, as well as across the country, sounded the alarm about the presence of police in schools. These concerns served as a catalyst for districts to consider more pronounced changes. For example, TSD had already begun to shift from school police to SSOs; but in 2020, school board members considered a policy change not only to remove school police entirely but also to eliminate metal detectors and other forms of surveillance. Similarly, RSD considered removing SROs from their schools.

Ultimately, neither district went so far as to completely remove security personnel: TSD opted to continue with the original proposal to change its school police to SSOs, and RSD chose to keep its SROs without any reforms despite several RSD school board members expressing their resistance to having SROs in schools. These leaders were adamant that district resources should be directed to strengthening mental health supports for students. The primary concern from several school board members was that the use of SROs in schools would detract from the mental health resources that students would need to succeed in schools. One school board member said:

“Children don’t just misbehave for no reason, and our mental health professionals would be exceedingly important in working with our children. That’s where we need to have our focus, because at this time, [RSD] is exceedingly high ranking in the state in terms of the amount of young people we refer to the justice system. I would deeply love to see that change because our kids deserve compassion and not criminalization.”

However, both districts' school leaders — citing their own perceptions that SROs are crucial to school safety — resisted the removal of these officers. Partly because of this pushback and partly because most school board members in both districts also believed SROs to be crucial to school safety, district leaders chose not to answer the calls to remove security personnel from schools. Instead, district leaders decided to make other reforms to security personnel, such as, in TSD, to rename SSOs, change their uniforms, and revise their responsibilities to meet what leaders perceived as the underlying reasons for calls to remove security personnel. In RSD, school board members interpreted complaints as primarily against SSOs rather than SROs; for that reason, the school board initially chose not to make any reforms to SROs and instead modified the SSO role in ways similar to TSD's reforms.

In short, district leaders have reconciled their own conflicting mindsets and perspectives on security personnel and their presence in schools by emphasizing the benefits of hardened approaches and ensuring there are additional efforts to support the mental health of students. One participant suggested, “When kids say, ‘We don’t want police,’ what they’re [really] saying is ‘We don’t want that uniform. We don’t want that mentality. We don’t want that kind of thing in our schools.’” Rather than concede to the community’s wishes for the removal of security personnel and metal detectors, district leaders and school board members interpreted those wishes as a call to reform policies, practices, and training for security personnel — and emphasized the need for these approaches to maintain students’ physical safety. Consider the following comment by a TSD district leader:

“Trust us...I know a lot of people say, ‘Do away with the school safety officers’ and/or ‘We don’t need them.’ ...[SSOs have] probably intervened [in], I can’t even told you, hundreds and thousands of possible [instances that] could have been shootings or a lot of bad stuff. A lot of bad stuff could have happened if [SSOs] wouldn’t have intervened.”

Despite the lack of evidence to back up this belief, many interviewees, including school board members, district leaders, and principals, saw these potential instances of violence as a justification for the continued presence of SSOs within schools, and the slight changes in appearance, role, and additional training were justified as meeting the community’s calls for change. For many (but certainly not all) of the board members and district leaders interviewed, the SSO-related policy and practice changes have been both necessary and sufficient to address the concerns heightened by the context of George Floyd’s death.

DISTRICT LEADERS SEE SECURITY MEASURES AS NECESSARY BUT ACKNOWLEDGE THEY ALONE ARE INSUFFICIENT

All district and school leaders agreed that security personnel, metal detectors, and other forms of surveillance are crucial for the physical safety of students. When asked to assess the value of reforms to SSOs, one district leader, while discussing other comprehensive changes, summarized a sentiment voiced by many interviewees:

“And I think ... if you look at the work we’re doing ... with our school, what used to be school safety officers ... I think we’re doing some really progressive work.”

There was also consensus that these security measures alone are insufficient and that threats students face outside of school may affect behaviors and experiences within them. So, school and district leaders recognize the need for a comprehensive approach that recognizes these factors. For instance, students who bring banned items to schools, who would have previously been subject to suspension or a referral to law enforcement, now participate in the diversion program. TSD district leaders believe this program has led to the notable decline in disciplinary infractions apparent in district-level discipline data as well as the drop in the number of students suspended from schools. RSD’s diversion program is still too new to see results yet, but school and district leaders are optimistic about the potential impacts.

DISTRICT LEADERS CONTINUOUSLY WORK TO IMPROVE AND REFORM EFFORTS FOR SCHOOL SAFETY

In both districts, leaders continue to change school security policies as conditions evolve; they recognize a need to continuously evaluate and update their policies and practices for student safety and well-being based on context and feedback from students and the community. For example, in response to family and student concerns about safety when walking to and from school, TSD district leaders have instituted a program in which neighborhood residents patrol areas around high schools to keep students safe as they travel between school and home. Additionally, with a recent increase in gun violence, TSD outlined a new school safety plan that includes an enhanced police presence at arrival and dismissal times, an increase in SSOs, and an expansion of TSD's threat assessment team. It's important to note, however, that these changes only strengthen hardening approaches, with increased surveillance, rather than employ more evidence-based policies and practices that address root causes for violence. Furthermore, although district leaders believe these policies to be the best way to respond to student and community concerns for safety, these policies directly contradict other student and community concerns about the use of police and surveillance in schools — yet another example of school and district leaders filtering the voices of students and communities through their own biases and perceptions. For example, consider one principal's response to whether there has been pushback on the use of metal detectors:

“[Metal detectors are not meant] to criminalize; it's all right to push back, you know? That's how great things are created – because of pushback. You become stronger when you receive a negative push to something that you're trying to illustrate; and if it doesn't hold water, it won't work. But for the most part, we have received some [pushback], but I think we were able to really come up with a great strategy to show why [metal detectors] are necessary.”

While recognizing the disagreement with having metal detectors in schools, school and district leaders continued to believe that their perceptions and beliefs in having such hardening measures take precedence, and that they must convince others of this need.

SCHOOL LEADERS VARY IN THEIR IMPLEMENTATION OF DISTRICT POLICIES

Across and within districts, school leaders varied in how they implemented different policies, partly due to their interpretations of district policies and availability of training and other resources, and partly because principals worked to realize their own visions of school climate.

At TSD, many school leaders expressed a lack of adequate guidance or support. As one TSD school leader noted, “We're all kind of operating on our own.” While TSD school leaders are aligned with district leaders in supporting school safety and student well-being, many principals are confused by some of the changes. These administrators feel that they individually are creating the best structures within their schools to meet shared goals. All principals expressed uncertainty about what the new roles of SSOs truly consisted of; nonetheless, these educators were committed to building safe and positive learning environments where students feel safe and welcome.

In slight contrast, RSD school leaders expressed a deeper understanding of the reforms the district had adopted and the vision it had set forth for school safety and student well-being. This clarity could be due to better guidance from district leaders and/or the district-provided training that all school leaders and staff received on restorative practices



and other relationship-building practices. At the same time, however, like TSD principals, RSD principals often resorted to their own ideas about how to implement these policies, such as where SSOs were stationed and their specific duties, and thought that their schools needed more resources to best support student safety and well-being. For example, one RSD principal expressed a need for updated metal detectors that would prevent students from being able to walk around them.

Thus, implementation in schools often depends on the resources, staff, and leadership, and the needs of students within each school. Most school leaders interviewed expressed frustration with a lack of support, but they were also unanimously aligned in saying that creating a safe learning environment where students are known by name, where students consider school to be a safe space (both physically and mentally), and where students have strong relationships with adults was a priority and that the efforts to increase physical safety in the schools, if implemented well, could contribute to the goal of creating safe learning environments for students. One principal spoke of the need to implement these policies “with love.”



FINDINGS: APPROACHES TO SCHOOL SAFETY AND STUDENT WELL-BEING

Although both districts' leaders agreed that security personnel play a crucial role in school safety, they often expressed other approaches as paramount. Ed Trust researchers noted three core approaches that school leaders used to promote safety in their schools: relationships, school hardening, and structuring the school day.

Perhaps the most common approach that school and district leaders took to support student safety and well-being was an understanding that relationships must be at the core of safety efforts.

SCHOOL LEADERS AGREE THAT RELATIONSHIPS LEAD TO DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS

Many principals expressed the need to have strong relationships with students to better understand them, meet their needs, and ensure schools are a safe space for them. Specifically, school leaders believed that strengthening relationships with students would help students communicate more about their contexts and experiences. In one TSD school, a school leader stated:

“I want [school] to be a space where, if something’s going on, kids feel comfortable enough to tell us. Our kids live in a world where it’s, like, no snitching. They can see a friend, a parent, a sibling get murdered, hurt, harmed, and they won’t say anything because they fear for their safety. I want our school to be a place where students let us know in advance things that are going on. So, we can help them keep this a safe space.”

Similarly, one RSD principal explained:

“When students walk in, we always say hello, we remember their names. And we ask how they’re doing, wish them a good day. That’s what sets the precedent for the day — that we know them, that we see right away when they walk in how they’re feeling, what their day is going to be like, and then we can set them up for success.”

Teachers and school leaders always greeted students by name and asked them how they were, received high-fives and hugs, and joked around throughout the school day. In class, teachers had displays reflective of their students' backgrounds and posted student-created materials on their walls. In the hallways, inspirational posters and behavioral expectations reminded students of their worth and of what is expected of them. Verbal praise and encouragement were common, and discipline was most often led with an individualized approach to correcting behavior while expressing high expectations. Analyses of observations found these practices were most prevalent in supporting students' well-being throughout the day.

This emphasis on the importance of relationship-building in interviews and in practices observed in schools was recognized as core to creating a safe and welcoming school environment. Although a sense of belonging is not often at the forefront of conversations about school safety and student well-being, meaningful connections in schools can ensure that students feel safer, physically and mentally, in their learning environments. School staff believed they were “baking” this value into their students' daily experiences.

SCHOOL STAFF OVERESTIMATE THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING AND RESPECT

Because leaders recognize that students experience hardships and stressors outside of school, they sought to lead with an approach that holds students accountable while also seeking to support students' well-being. During observations, school leaders made this point by directing researchers' attention to their school counselors and staff dedicated to school climate, to the creation of wellness rooms, and, most especially, to the engagement between school staff and students that fostered a climate focused on belonging, as discussed earlier.

Academic Climate

One important way to engage students in school is to create an environment where they are challenged and supported academically.⁵ Survey findings suggest educators in these districts make efforts toward — and are moderately effective in — creating a positive academic climate. Most students in both TSD and RSD agreed or strongly agreed that teachers encourage students to work hard to be successful, help students with schoolwork, give students opportunities to participate in classes, and go out of their way to help students. Staff in both districts, however, expressed a less positive view of the academic climate. While many staff at RSD and TSD believe their school is a supportive and inviting place for students to learn and think that staff set high standards for academic performance for all students, the lower percentages of staff who agreed with these statements is concerning. These findings suggest that although school leaders and educators are working to create rigorous learning environments where students are supported academically, staff and students see room for improvement.

Figure 1. Student and Staff Perceptions of Academic Climate in RSD

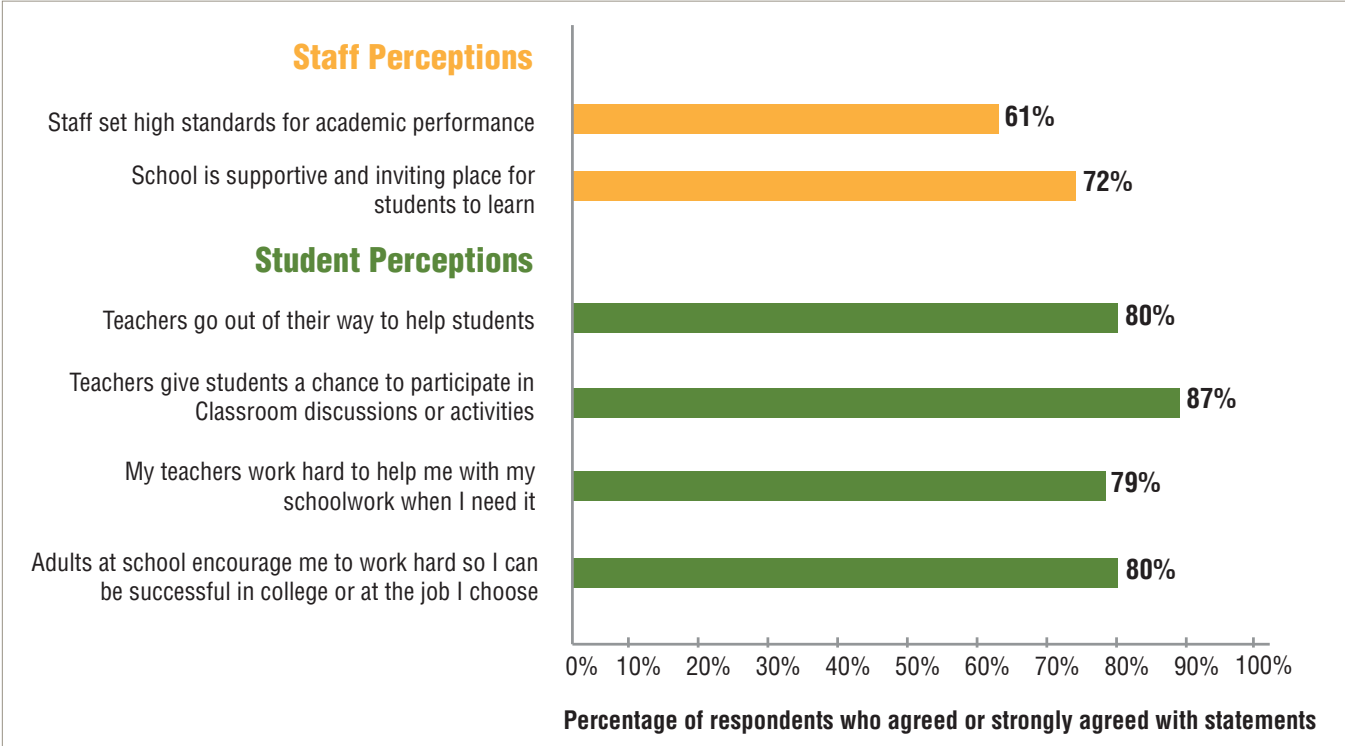
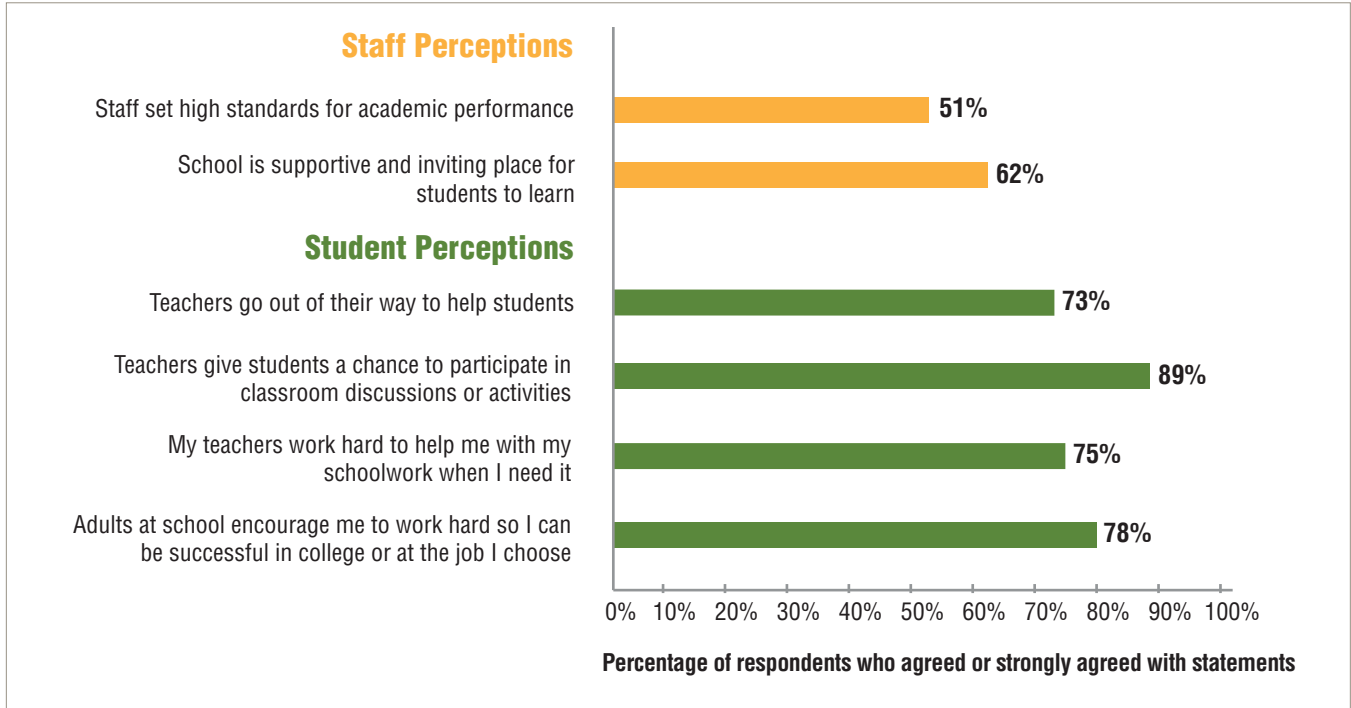


Figure 2. Student and Staff Perceptions of Academic Climate in TSD



Respect and Fair Treatment

Student perspectives about fair treatment were less positive. In both TSD and RSD, just two-thirds of students feel that they are treated fairly and that the rules are applied fairly. Staff in these districts similarly have small majorities (68% at RSD and 58% at TSD) who agree that adults treat all students fairly. Even worse, fewer than 4 in 10 students in TSD and RSD believe adults in their schools treat all students with respect. These perceptions can hinder relationship-building in schools, especially with those students who perceive unfair treatment due to adult bias.

Figure 3. Student and Staff Perceptions of Respect and Fair Treatment in RSD

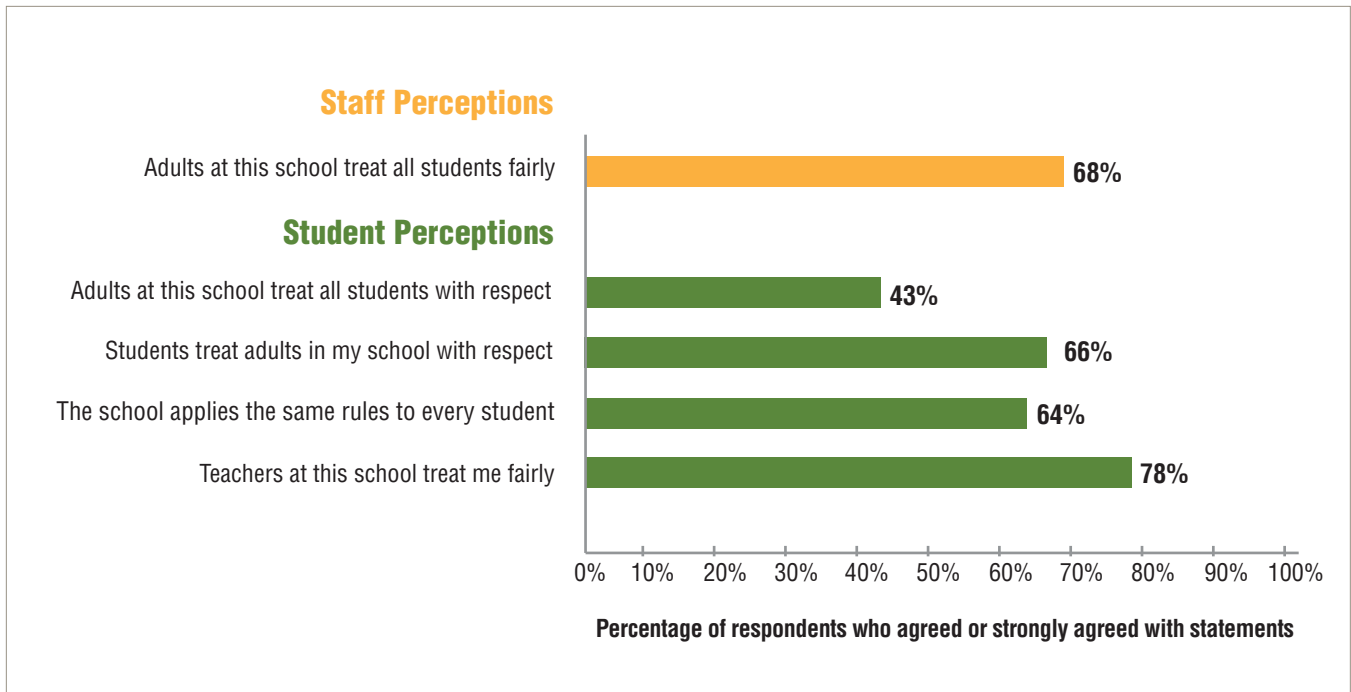
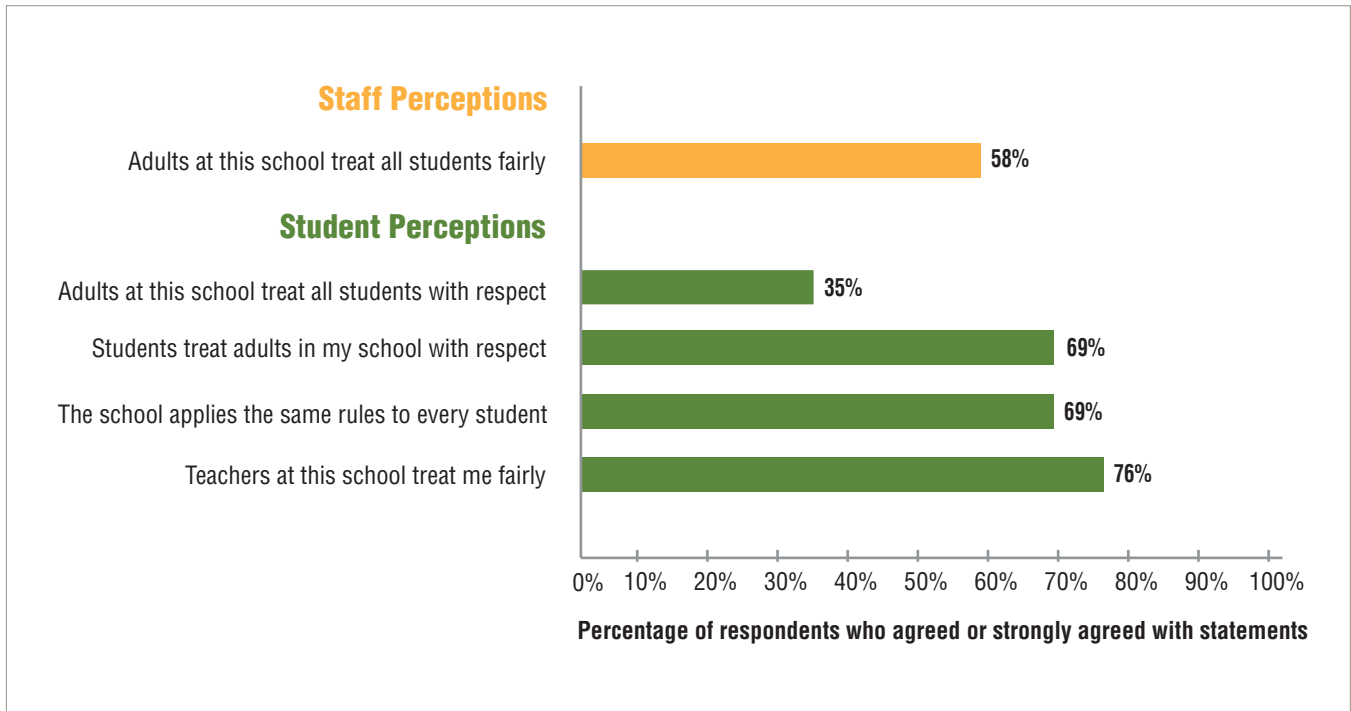


Figure 4. Student and Staff Perceptions of Respect and Fair Treatment in TSD



Sense of Belonging

Students were less likely than staff to report a strong sense of belonging in their schools. Specifically, roughly half (44% to 50%) of students in TSD and slightly more than half (52% to 62%) of students in RSD agree that they feel close to people at their school, are happy to be at their school, and are part of their school. At the same time, however, most staff in both districts believe adults in their school really care about every student and acknowledge and pay attention to students. These contrasts between student and staff responses suggest that although many staff members care about their students, that sentiment is not currently translating to students’ experiences in school.

Figure 5. Student and Staff Perceptions on Student Belonging in RSD

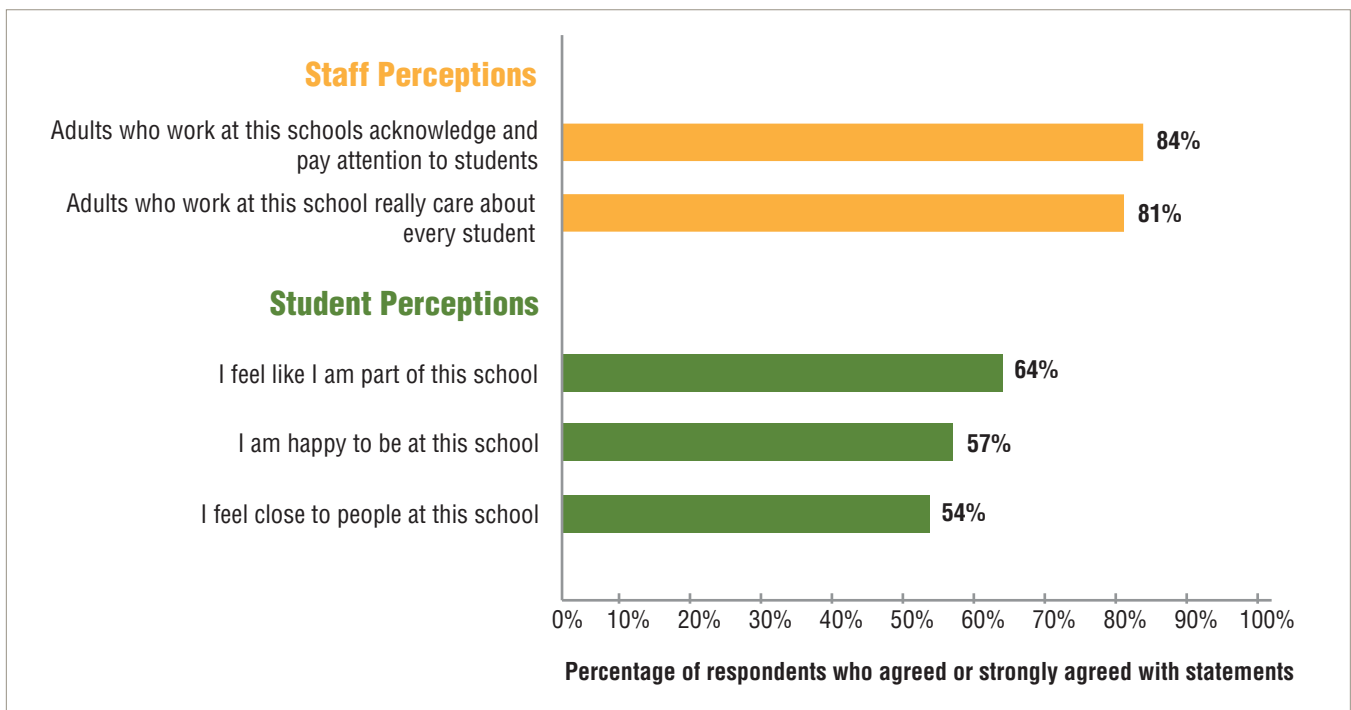
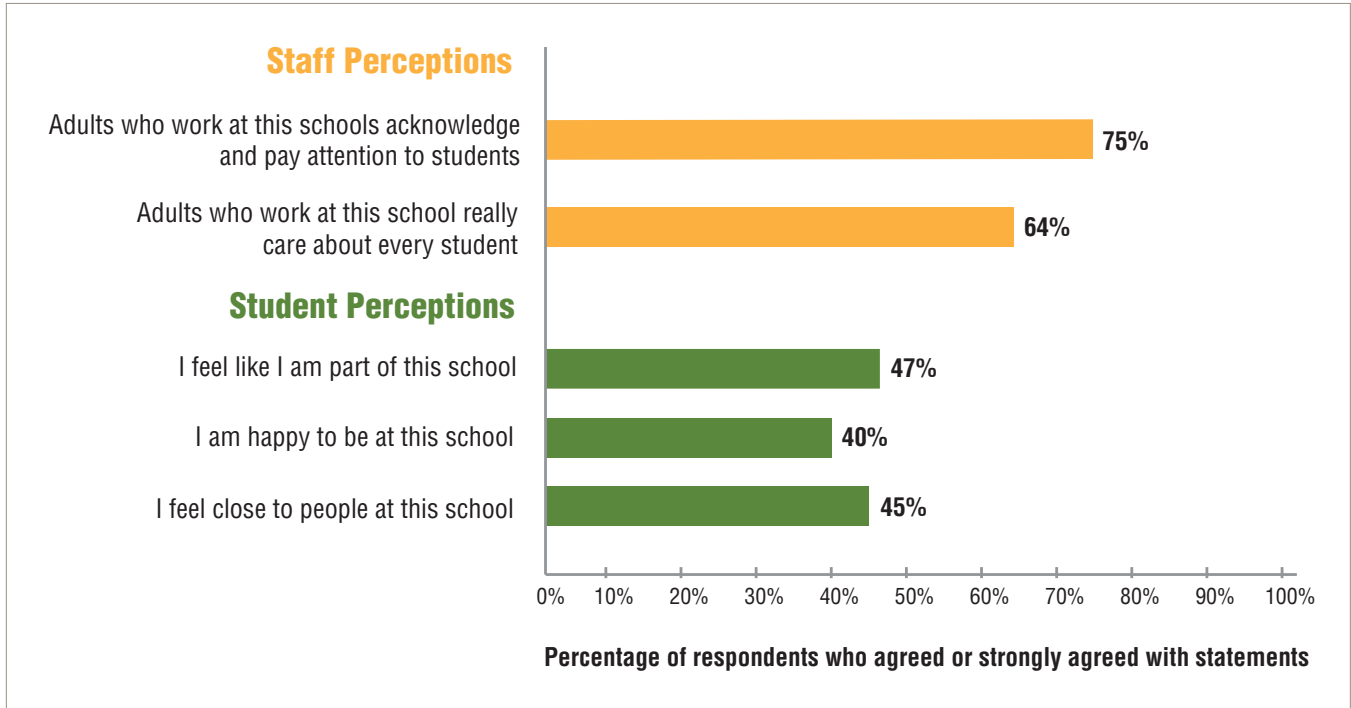
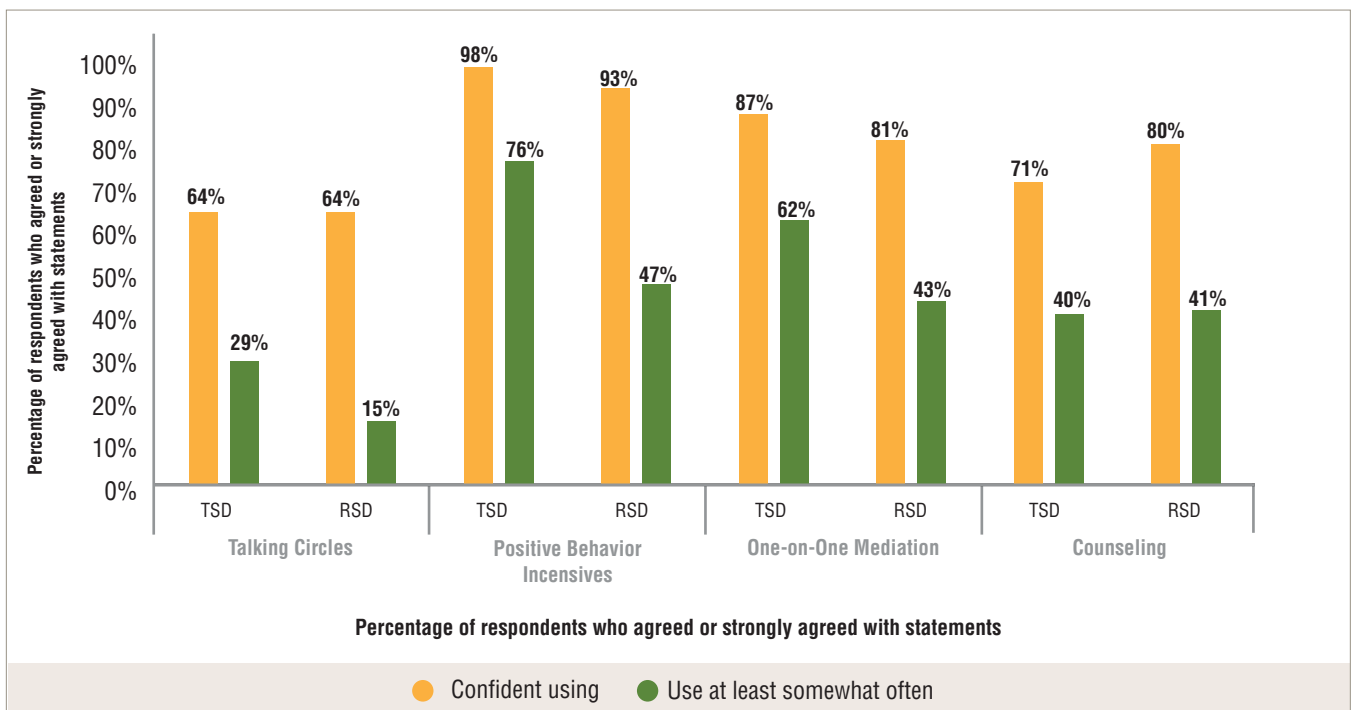


Figure 6. Student and Staff Perceptions on Student Belonging in TSD



One factor that could be contributing to this disconnection in TSD is adults’ mindsets about students. Less than a third of TSD staff respondents believed students are motivated to learn (31%) and to complete their homework (29%). These responses indicate that staff in TSD may have a deficit lens towards students that can affect students’ sense of belonging. Additionally, while the majority of staff reported feeling at least somewhat confident in their use of restorative forms of discipline that are meant to build, maintain, and repair relationships, such as [talking circles](#), [positive behavior incentives](#), [one-on-one mediations](#), and [counseling](#), responses were lower for actually using these practices at least somewhat often.

Figure 7. Confidence With and Use of Restorative Discipline Practices in RSD and TSD



It's therefore clear that although many educators and school leaders have made efforts to support students and implement policies and practices that create positive learning environments, more work must be done to build relationships and ensure that students feel a sense of belonging.

School leaders inconsistently implement security protocols

In addition to SSOs, district and school leaders use other approaches — including metal detectors, security cameras, and bag searches with X-ray machines — to harden themselves against outside threats. Implementation of these practices, however, varies. For example, in some schools that researchers observed, students frequently walked around metal detectors rather than through them; in others, every student was expected to walk diligently through the metal detector, and students who set off the alarm had to go back, empty their pockets, and walk through again. In TSD, all students' bags were checked at all schools, but in RSD, the implementation was more varied. In some schools, every student's bag was checked at the door; in others, bag checks were random.

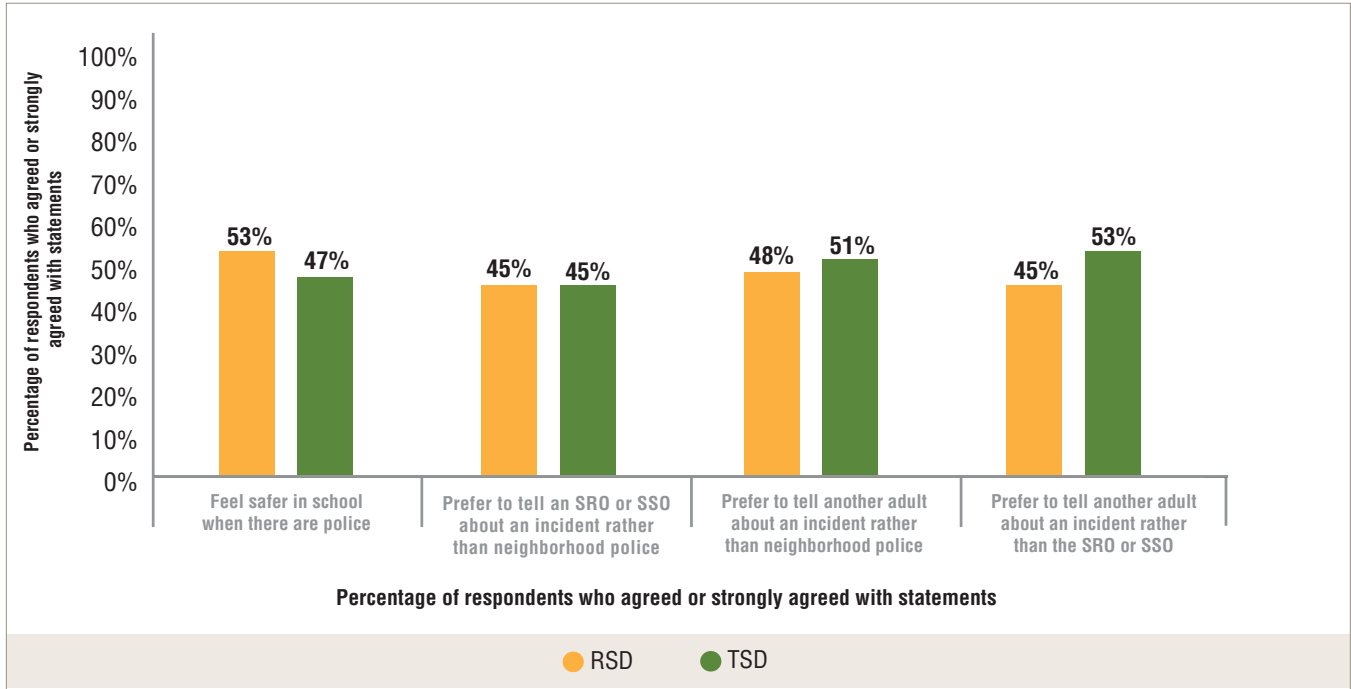
Many school leaders expressed the need for these security measures not only to prevent students from bringing contraband to school but also to thwart instances of violence from the community. In particular, one RSD school leader expressed concern that families would “bring their issues” to school and that violence would ensue. However, when researchers asked if this had ever happened, the answer was that it hadn't but that it remained a concern regardless — which speaks to existing expectations and mindsets that there is always a potential for danger from students, families, and the community. This heightened concern for potential events also led to school leaders' preference for metal detectors, security cameras, and bag searches. For example, in one school where many students would walk around the metal detectors, the principal stated that they were planning to upgrade the detectors so that students could not walk around them. When asked if there had been an incident to prompt this upgrade, the principal responded, “No, no, nothing like that. We haven't had anything happen, but we're going to upgrade our metal detectors because it's important to prevent that.”

Students don't report feeling safer with SSOs

In the end, these security protocols may not have had the intended impact on students' sense of safety. At both TSD and RSD, only a moderate percentage of students (46% and 51%, respectively) agreed that they feel safer in school when police are present. In TSD and RSD, less than half of students would prefer to tell an SSO (or an SRO in RSD) at school (44% and 44%, respectively) or another adult in school (47% and 46%, respectively) about an incident instead of neighborhood police. Many students in TSD and RSD (51% and 43%, respectively) expressed they would prefer to tell another adult in their school instead of the SSO (or SRO in RSD) in their school about an incident. This finding suggests that adults in schools have not built the relationships needed to be trusted confidants for students when issues arise outside of school — and that students slightly prefer confiding in non-security personnel inside the school.

At both TSD and RSD, only a moderate percentage of students agreed that they feel safer in school when police are present

Figure 8. Perceptions of Safety and Relationships With SROs



Security is pervasive through school structure

Most practices to ensure school safety and student well-being can be seen in the structure of students’ daily experiences, but again these practices vary between schools. For example, some school leaders in both districts strictly limit time between classes, with staff monitoring the hallways, and ensure students have assigned meeting points, such as the gym, at the beginning of the day before classes start. This allows staff to monitor students more easily. In RSD, these efforts were particularly prevalent by staff, especially SSOs, who monitor the hallways between classes and prevent students from grouping up in fear of violence breaking out. Another example is one RSD school that limits school lunch shifts to a minimal 12-minute period, with only a few students in the cafeteria at a time, monitored by SSOs. These examples show the ways in which school leaders’ well-articulated values in relationships and student well-being actually take practical form through surveillance and lean toward efforts to control student behavior and prevent conflicts from occurring.

Other examples, however, are more supportive of well-being, such as providing breakfast for students first thing in the morning (either through pick-up or via delivery to classrooms) and having wellness rooms where students can go when they’re feeling emotionally unwell.

Additionally, teachers themselves have their own practices for classroom management, such as posting their own clear signs for classroom behavior rules, procedures, and consequences and asking students to place bookbags in designated areas.

These structural approaches to creating order and safety, while perhaps the most varied, were the efforts school leaders discussed most often in interviews and during visits as effective ways to address safety in students’ daily experience in school. This is because a common concern of school leaders is the conflicts that occur during times where students are least monitored, such as in hallways between classes and during lunch times.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE SCHOOL SAFETY AND STUDENT WELL-BEING

This study showcases two urban school districts working to support the safety and well-being of a diverse student population that has been heavily affected not only by COVID-19 but also by long-standing racial and systemic injustices. Findings suggest that district and school leaders, as well as school staff, have taken earnest steps toward supporting these students; recognize that improvements still need to be made; and continue to evaluate and reform policies and practices related to student safety and well-being. As other districts across the country face similar circumstances and hold similar intentions to support the nation's most vulnerable students, Ed Trust offers several recommendations based on this study and on other similar research.

Research on workplace and school violence shows that there's a [path toward an attack](#). It starts with a grievance and escalates until there is an actual breach and assault. Most strategies geared toward hardening schools against these attacks, such as placing police in schools and adding metal detectors, target the *end* of this path, when an attack is ready to occur. However, these efforts intervene too late in the pathway, when a situation has already escalated too far.



Adapted from: [Torchstone Global](#)

As district and school leaders continue to evaluate and improve on efforts to create safe schools that support student well-being, they must keep in mind the evidence base for existing approaches and work toward a vision of schools where students are physically safe and feel a sense of belonging. Leaning too hard in the direction of physical security without attention to creating inclusive and welcoming environments will undermine efforts to establish safe schools. Not only does research attest that [strategies to increase physical security do not have the strong impacts](#) hoped for,⁶ but it also shows that such strategies can actually *decrease* feelings of safety among students and harm school climate.⁷ Furthermore, these physical [security approaches can strengthen the school-to-prison pipeline](#).⁸

The most effective strategies to create safe schools are ones that address root causes of violence and use prevention strategies much earlier in the path. In particular, making school environments that support positive social, emotional, and academic development, such as by supporting students through conflict resolution and relationship-building, can prevent grievances from escalating and serve to de-escalate situations.⁹ Additionally, by employing approaches that improve school climate and student well-being, school and district leaders can turn the school-to-prison pipeline into a school-to-possibility pipeline that ensures all students have access to positive learning environments where they can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.

This case study presents two school districts with leaders who have adopted a variety of policies and practices that both harden schools and aim to support students with more evidence-based policies that support student well-being. Historically, both districts have relied heavily on physical security, but leaders have recognized the need to also create inclusive and welcoming environments. Unfortunately, such emphasis on hardening has undermined the impacts leaders hoped for, as the survey results for both districts attest. Despite this, district leaders have struggled to shift their efforts away from hardening measures — often because of their own mindsets and beliefs about the need for security and because of pushback from school leaders and staff.

This problem speaks to a general belief held by many adults in the school districts: that students themselves and the communities they come from are dangerous and therefore need to be surveilled and controlled. In interviews, principals often cited the conflicts between students and communities as dangerous and the reason why security in schools was needed to prevent violence. To fully shift away from these hardening measures and replace them with evidence-based policies and practices, adults will need to shift their mindsets about — and build stronger and more authentic relationships with — their students and the communities serve.¹⁰ Adults must truly and effectively use practices that intervene at earlier stages of the pathway, and they must genuinely believe that if they have meaningful relationships with students — if they support their social and emotional development — then their students and communities won't, in fact, be “dangerous,” because they'll be receiving the support they need to thrive.

These mindsets, and the skills adults need to use these practices, take time to learn. It's important for both changemakers and advocates for change to recognize that transforming culture and climate, shifting mindsets to be asset based, and learning the skills necessary to support students holistically cannot happen overnight and require intentional action by district and school leaders.

School and district leaders should therefore evaluate where they are in their current policies and practices and consider how best to move forward with evidence-based reforms. The case study in this report suggests that these reforms require thoughtful consideration to gain buy-in from all stakeholders and ensure fidelity of implementation. Specifically, the authors categorize a spectrum of five types of schools; school and district leaders should first consider where a school or district stands in its current policies, and leaders should consider next steps to move along the spectrum to the ultimate goal: school-to-possibility pipeline schools.

School and district leaders can turn the school-to-prison pipeline into a school-to-possibility pipeline where students can thrive

5 Approaches to School Safety & Student Well-Being

These schools are hardened schools with a high emphasis on physical security and little to no attention on student well-being, but strong guardrails are in place to prevent harm by physical security (for example, a memorandum of understanding to prevent SROs from intervening in routine discipline).

These schools are working to scale down their physical security and scale up the policies and practices that support student well-being.

Hardened schools with guardrails

Schools scaling up positive practices and scaling down physical security

1

2

3

4

5

School-to-prison pipeline schools

Schools with a positive foundation

School-to-possibility pipeline schools

These schools are hardened schools with a high emphasis on physical security, no guardrails to prevent the harm that physical security can cause, and little to no attention on student well-being.

These schools have physical security with strong guardrails and have also begun to adopt and implement policies and practices that support student well-being.

These schools have fully transitioned to using best practices that address root causes of violence and support students' social, emotional, and academic development, and these schools have removed physical security.



Regardless of where a school or district falls on this spectrum, Ed Trust further encourages leaders and staff to consider the following recommendations:

- 1. Provide clear messaging** to principals and school staff on existing policies, including detailed guidance and support in implementing recent policy changes. This guidance should also be updated as policies evolve. Many school leaders in this study understood that policies were made with the best intentions but still felt a lack of clarity on how changes in policies should be implemented.
- 2. Seek deeper engagement with students and families in decision-making** to ensure that district leaders' interpretations reflect what students and families truly want and need. In this study many district leaders filtered student and family voices through their own experiences and beliefs; continuous, thoughtful engagement can prevent this filtering from becoming policies that fail to speak to student and family experiences. Engagement efforts could include the development of structured partnerships with existing family and student groups or the creation of a diversely-represented family and student advisory group that is tasked with hearing district-level decisions and discussing them with district leaders.
- 3. Strengthen the capacity of adults in schools** to build relationships and foster a sense of belonging in schools. Despite understanding that relationships are crucial to well-being, staff in this study reported that they did not use important practices that build relationships. Efforts to support staff could include professional development that helps adults interrogate biases and improve cultural competence, including using asset-based lenses, understanding instructional power, and supporting adults in using relationship-building and restorative practices.
- 4. Hire staff members who can support student well-being beyond physical security.** Most students in this study did not feel safer with security personnel in their schools, and there was a slight preference to confide in adults other than security personnel. These adults can include school counselors, restorative justice coordinators, and staff members dedicated to enhancing the school climate.

Every child deserves and needs a safe, inclusive learning environment in which to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. Although physical security methods in schools are easy to identify as “safety measures,” they are often ineffective and even harmful. Despite best intentions to use hardened approaches to support student safety and well-being, school and district leaders must move away from these practices and replace them with evidence-based ones. Although these practices require more time, the effort is worth it.

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