

School Leaders Doing the  
Work the Right Way:

Building Walls Between  
Schools and the  
Justice System

BROWNSVILLE AREA SCHOOL  
DISTRICT  
BROWNSVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA



With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, AASA profiled five school districts that are building walls between schools and the justice system, engaging in restorative practices, working to eliminate bias and disproportionality, and providing all children with fair and equitable access to high-quality opportunities. Districts profiled were Aldine ISD, Houston, TX; Brownsville Area School District, PA; St. Louis Public Schools, MO; Phoenix Union High School District, AZ; and Riverhead Central School District, NY. We sought districts that worked intentionally to reduced school-related juvenile justice interactions where the superintendent and school system played a key role in changes to limit youth interaction with law enforcement, school-based arrests, and juvenile justice. AASA created five district profiles and a sixth composite/summary profile of the districts' work to reduce school - related juvenile justice interactions.

Each district profiled noted the impact that Covid-19 had on their efforts. While time out of school due to the pandemic posed challenges for everyone, it also provided districts with opportunities to make bold moves, such as fully embracing Social, Emotional Learning (SEL) and eliminating SRO contracts.



**Superintendent:** Keith Hartbauer

**Number of Students:** 1,483

**Demographics:** 79% White; 9.9% African American; 8.8% Multiracial; 1.7% Hispanic; 0.3% Native American; 0.2% Asian

**District Type:** Rural

Free And Reduced Meals Rate: 58.7%

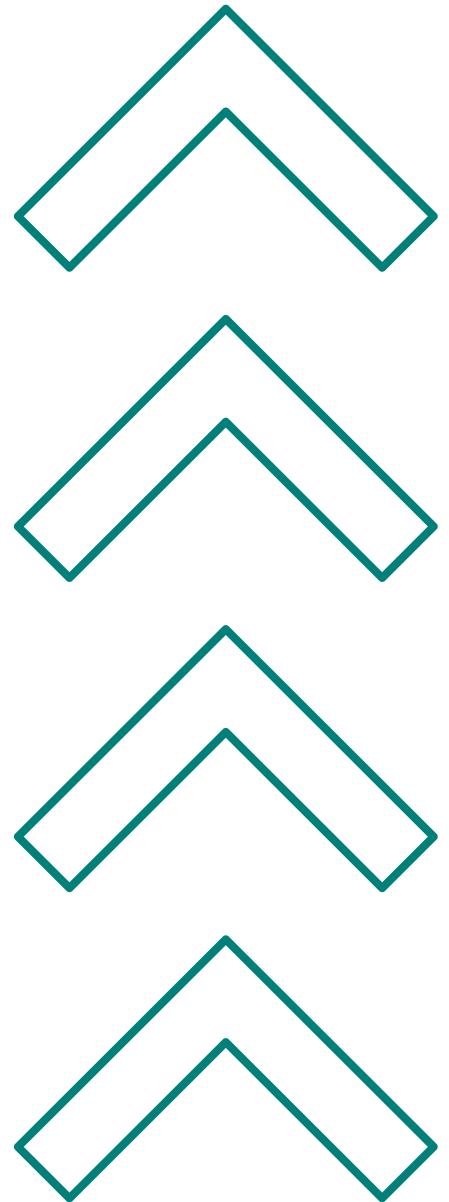
**SRO in District:** No

**Brownsville Area School District:** Located in southwestern Pennsylvania near the borders of Maryland and West Virginia, the district has 1,483 students, with 21% minority enrollment. The district and its students have experienced many of the problems related to the opioid epidemic, including many students being raised by grandparents due to parental drug use. The district has three schools – elementary, middle and high school – as well as a cyber school that offers virtual learning for students K-12.

**Catalyst for Change:** The appointment of Keith Hartbauer as superintendent was the catalyst for changes to discipline and other policies in the district. He recognized the importance of a better way to meet the needs of students, as well as lowering out-of-school/-class time due to suspensions. Both the handbook and student code of conduct were outdated and did not meet the current needs of students or staff.

School suspensions were high, as were absenteeism rates. To address the root causes of these issues that stemmed from poverty, lack of transportation and an overwhelmed teaching staff, the district began implementing restorative practices and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). It also started doing social suspensions (students were “suspended” from extracurricular activities such as dances, performances and games) to keep students in school and learning, while still punishing misbehavior.

The district’s focus has been on restorative practices, which allow students to be connected to resources within the school while also having alternatives to the discipline practices. It added two resource specialist positions to address truancy and behavior/mental health. Students are referred to the resource specialists through the Student Assistance Program. They are met by the resource specialist, who then determines the level of care that they may need. If deemed necessary, a referral to the school-based therapist is made. If not, the resource specialist meets with the students to address underlying issues related to truancy, behaviors, poor grades, etc. The handbook was also looked at for consistency. The district also has social workers that meet with students with individualized education plans, as well as a partnership with Chestnut Ridge to provide school-based counseling that helps remove the barrier of transportation for some students.




**Police Department:** The school district does not have SROs. There are two armed school police officers and four security guards within the combined high school and middle school, and two security officers at the elementary school. These officers help with disciplinary issues, as well as assisting with home visits to address truancy. They also do morning checks of metal detector scans and book bag searches. The security team is union staff, not part of the district staff and, as such, have not received training in restorative practices yet. The district is committed to training all union staff (cafeteria workers, bus drivers, security, etc.) in restorative practices.

The local police department is only active in the district once a week because of the small size of the town. The state police oftentimes handle any issues that come up. The district does not have any direct communication with the state police department.

**Police involved Youth:** There is a disconnect between the schools and law enforcement in the district. The schools don't know when a student has been arrested or otherwise involved with the justice system until they come back to school. There is no direct communication between the district and juvenile justice. The district doesn't have its own alternative schools due to its small size; however, students have three or four options for alternative school placement through the Regional Education Service Agency (RESA). There is communication between the district and the alternative schools that aids in the student's transition back to the district. Justice-involved students are automatically enrolled in the SAP (Student Assistance Program) to provide additional supports and aid their transitions back to school.

**Covid:** The district was short-staffed prior to the pandemic and has remained so since that time. It is no longer able to do in-school suspensions (ISS) or Saturday morning detention. After students returned to school following COVID, the district focused more on students' mental health concerns. Staff began the school year focused on building rapport with students as the priority.

**Sustainability:** While funding in the district is done annually, it has leveraged ESSER funds to secure long-term contracts with outside sources, such as Chestnut Ridge. The current agreement with the counseling service is for five years. The district also continues to partner with national organizations in this work, as well as make investments in mental-health services for students based on the research and best practices.



**Disproportionality:** The district implemented a diversity program to address conflict or issues with diversity. Diversity lessons were added to the guidance curriculum to raise student awareness and the district put together a diversity class for the middle school, with plans to implement a similar course at the high school in the following academic year. The district has a diversity committee made up of both staff and students. Due to the high rate of poverty, the district is focused on socioeconomics and meeting the basic needs of students for shelter, food and clothing.

