Creating Safe School Environments in Colorado

Policymakers, educators and advocates have identified a need to increase school safety following several high-profile incidents of violence in U.S. schools. Some of the proposed solutions are not supported by evidence of their effectiveness. The Colorado Children's Campaign compiled research on effective ways to create safer school environments.

Background

In the 2018-2019 budget process, both the Colorado State House and Senate amended the budget to address school safety with an additional $35 million in one-time funding. The Joint Budget Committee concluded that $19.5 million would draw from the State Education Fund and $15.5 million would draw from the State Public School Fund. The funds will be directed "to local school districts, BOCES, and public schools including charter schools to use for capital construction; assistance for physical security; communication improvements; the training of school personnel and school resource officers; and/or coordination with emergency response teams."

What do we know about the safety of school environments in general?

- *School violence has decreased significantly since the early 1990s at the national level.* For students between the ages of 12 and 18, there has been a drop in the overall rate of students who were victims of school violence, and decreases in the percentages of kids reporting being a victim of violence at school, carrying a weapon, being threatened or hurt with a weapon, and being afraid of an attack on school grounds.[1]

- *A large body of research exists on the risk and protective factors associated with youth violence in schools nationally – both at the individual and social level.[2]* At the individual level, risk factors for participating in school violence include high emotional stress, low academic performance, being a bully or the victim of bullying, and exposure to violence and anti-social attitudes. Situations that offset these experiences (protective factors) include positive social orientation and high educational aspirations. At the peer level, low commitment to school, social rejection and a lack of involvement in activities are risk factors for violence; protective factors include exposure to positive school climates and close relationships with peers.

- *Little research exists on the mix of violence prevention strategies used in schools across Colorado and their effectiveness.* Funding research to establish a baseline of practices schools are using and their effectiveness would allow for more evidence-based policy making in future years.

Are physical security measures like metal detectors and school resource officers (armed police in schools or "SROs") effective in reducing school violence?

- *Research on the effectiveness of physical security measures and SROs is extremely limited.* The few studies that have been conducted in this area have found mixed results as to whether these investments actually reduce violence.[3,4] Some research has shown that an increased presence of SROs is associated with an increase in school-based arrests for minor misbehaviors, redefining matters of school discipline as situations for the criminal justice system.[5]

Which prevention strategies have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing school violence?

- *School violence prevention strategies that have been shown to mitigate violence risk factors and/or strengthen protective factors among students require long-term investments.* The following prevention strategies are supported by research findings and align with expert recommendations from the Colorado School Safety Resource Center, the American Public Health Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation:

Preferred Prevention Strategies	What does the research say?
In-school mental health services and behavioral interventions	Research summaries and literature reviews from the last two decades have found that in-school mental health services and behavioral interventions (on the part of school counselors, psychologists, social workers and nurses but also parents and other services in the community) can effectively respond to a variety of emotional and behavioral issues.[6] Intervention programs focusing on aggression have been shown to significantly decrease aggressive behaviors among students.[7] For children exposed to violence, a study found that mental health services decreased symptoms of PTSD and depression among urban students.[8]
Positive school climate	The school environment plays a significant role in setting the stage for school violence intervention.[9] Three national studies have demonstrated that schools with students who report feeling more connected to their school tend to have less disorder and violence.[10,11,12]
Positive behavior support	Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a school-wide curriculum that explicitly teaches behavioral expectations to students.[13] In schools where the PBIS curriculum has been implemented, two studies found reductions in suspensions, discipline referrals, and bullying among students reported by teachers.[14,15]
Threat assessment process	The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines is a school discipline model that recognizes student conflict early.[16] A study looking into schools using the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines demonstrated that students at these schools report less bullying and more positive perceptions of school climate.[17] When examining students who made violent threats, those attending schools using this Virginia model were more likely to receive counseling and parent conferences.[18]

Policy Recommendations and Best Practices

A joint statement of policy recommendations and best practices for supporting school safety was recently published by a coalition of education associations. "A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools," was co-authored by the National Association of School Resource Officers, the American School Counselor Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, the School Social Work Association of America, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.[19] Policy recommendations include:

1. Allow for blended, flexible use of funding streams in education and mental health services;
2. Improve staffing ratios to allow for the delivery of a full range of services and effective school–community partnerships;
3. Develop evidence-based standards for district-level policies to promote effective school discipline and positive behavior;
4. Fund continuous and sustainable crisis and emergency preparedness, response, and recovery planning and training that uses evidence-based models;
5. Provide incentives for intra- and interagency collaboration; and
6. Support multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). Colorado defines MTSS as "a prevention-based framework of team-driven, data-based problem solving for improving the outcomes of every student… through a layered continuum of evidence-based practices."[20]

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Contacts: Jennifer Corrigan, Lobbyist - 720-243-9511 or Leslie Colwell, VP, Education Initiatives - 202-641-0865
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