

ISD 287's Student Safety Coaches

Summary of Literature and Staff Survey School Year 2019 – 2020

Background

Intermediate School District 287 (ISD 287) provides intensive educational supports to its students. Like many school districts across the nation and in Minnesota, IDS 287 has contracted with police departments to station police officers (called “School Resource Officers”) in school buildings. However, ISD 287 ended these contracts and, beginning in school year 2017-2018, have used district employees titled “Student Safety Coaches” to build positive relationships with students and staff, intervene in difficult moments, and promote safety in district buildings.

Overview of evaluation

This year's evaluation combines multiple means of data collection. Researchers first met with relevant staff and reviewed district job descriptions and training documents to complete a logic model for the Student Safety Coach program. Next, researchers conducted a brief search of the literature to determine what, if any, best practices exist for school-based behavior responders. Finding very little literature, as the move away from police officers in school and toward other means of behavior intervention is relatively new, researchers reviewed literature examining why schools may decide to stop using police officers in school, and what promising practices may be emerging for school-based behavior interventionists. Finally, researchers developed and disseminated an online survey to district staff to understand staff perceptions of impact and possible areas for improvement to the Student Safety Coach program.

As part of a three-year evaluation, ISD 287 partnered with Wilder Research to develop an evaluation plan and collect some initial data about the Student Safety Coach program. For the 2019-2020 school year, the main evaluation activities included:

- Conducting a literature review focused on promising practices for school-based behavior interventionists and the evolution of school resource officers.
- Building a logic model.
- Collecting ISD 287 staff perceptions of the Student Safety Coach program.

Literature review

Wilder Research reviewed seven relevant sources; five were scholarly articles and two were school safety implementation guides. Sources raised themes about common concerns with police officers in schools, and the positive benefits of school- and district-based methods for creating school safety.

Police officers in school are unrelated to school safety

The first police officer was stationed to a school in the United States in 1953 (Javdani, 2019). Officials anticipated racist backlash to the school ceasing unconstitutional race-based segregation and wanted police on the scene. While there were fewer than 100 police officers in schools across the U.S. in 1970, as of 2019, there are “an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 officers patrolling elementary, middle, and high schools in the U.S.” (p. 253).

With the massive increase in the number of police officers in schools comes the possibility to better understand what relationship, if any, exists between police officers in schools and school safety. One meta-analysis of studies on this question concluded that “there is no evidence that school police officer presence is related to a deterrence effect on school violence, gun violence or mass shootings” (Javdani, 2019, p. 262). Another meta-analysis found that existing evidence “fails to support a school safety effect” of police officers in schools (Stern & Petrosino, 2018, p. 3). Another study “of the School Survey on Crime and Safety data found that for no type of crime was an increase in the presence of police in schools significantly related to decreased crime rates” (Dignity in Schools, 2016, p. 5).

Police officers in school are related to negative outcomes

While police in schools are unrelated to school safety, police in schools are related to harmful outcomes. Sources found that these harms include:

- **Decreased school connectedness.** One source found that “greater interaction with school police officers is related to less school connectedness. In turn, reduced school connectedness and greater perceived unfairness are related to higher levels of delinquency” (Javdani, 2019, p. 262).
- **Increased exclusionary discipline.** One meta-analysis concluded that “the presence of school police officers is linked to a higher likelihood of exclusionary school discipline practices” (Javdani, 2019, p. 262), and another found that “the presence of school resource officers in high schools was associated with higher rates of exclusionary discipline,” though also found a “second meta-analytic model with three effect sizes indicated no statistically significant relationship between school resource officer

presence and rates of exclusionary discipline” (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016, p. 217). A study in Texas found that “federal grants for police in schools increase middle school discipline rates by 6 percent . . . driven by sanctions for low-level offenses or school code of conduct violations” (Weisburst, 2019, p. 338). A final study found that “syntheses do point to an increase in the use of exclusionary disciplinary actions toward students in schools with school resource officers when compared with schools that do not have school resource officers” (Stern & Petrosino, 2018, p. 3).

- **Increased arrests of children in schools.** One study examined the 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection survey and found that “the association between police presence and arrest rates was stronger for all the groups examined in schools with police” (Homer & Fisher, 2020, p. 192).
- **Decreased educational achievement.** One study of data on 2,500,000 students in Texas and policing grants for schools concluded that “exposure to a three-year federal grant for school police is associated with 2.5 percent decrease in high school graduation rates and a 4 percent decrease in college enrollment rates” (Weisburst, 2019, p. 338).
- **Increased racial inequities not explained by students’ behavior.** Many studies confirm the anti-Black impact of police officers in schools, and some studies point to the idea that the anti-Black impact is not due to difference in the behavior of students across races. One study found that “Black students were 2.6 times more likely to receive suspensions and represented the largest percentage of suspensions for subjective offenses” (Javdani, 2019, p. 254). The study in Texas found that “Black students experience the largest increases in discipline” when schools accept federal grants for police in schools (Weisburst, 2019, p. 338). Another study concluded that arrest rates are higher in schools with police officers than in schools without them, “particularly for Black students and boys” (Homer & Fisher, 2020, p. 192). A final study found that “nationally, Black students are 2.3 times more likely to receive a referral to law enforcement for a school-related arrest as white students” (Dignity in Schools, 2016, p. 5). In addition to the study finding that Black students are subject to more discipline for subjective offenses than white students are, another study found “that higher rates of discipline for Black students compared to their white peers cannot be explained by differences in the rates of misbehavior or the poverty level of Black students” (p. 6).

Schools enjoy safety and other positive outcomes without police officers

Given the lack of relationship between police officers and safety, and the increased negative outcomes associated with police officers in schools, schools are increasingly using, evaluating, and reporting on factors that do create and maintain safe school environments. One study examined six New York City public schools that maintain safety, serve at-risk populations, and enjoy “significantly higher than average attendance, student stability and graduation rates, as well as dramatically lower than average incidence of crime and school suspensions” (Ofer et al., 2009, p. 7). Another is a resource guide for school-based behavior prevention and interventions (Dignity in Schools, 2016).

A key finding from these sources is that relationships drive safety. “Researchers across the country . . . have found that relationships between students, parents, and staff are more important in making a school safe than increased security measures” (Dignity in Schools, 2016, p. 3).

Relevant recommendations include:

- **Use school-based restorative justice, peer mediators, behavior interventionists, and community intervention teams.** ISD 287 is familiar with restorative practices; we will not elaborate here. *Peer mediators* are students of the same age-group who “facilitate resolving disputes between two people or groups. Changes include improved self-esteem, listening and critical thinking skills, and improved school climate for learning, as well as reduced disciplinary actions and fewer fights” (Dignity in Schools, 2016, p. 9). *Behavior interventionists* are like Student Safety Coaches: “trained to prevent misbehavior and to build the use of positive behavior,” collaborate with multi-disciplinary teams, and are knowledgeable in behavior analysis (p. 9). *Community intervention teams* work in and around schools, “have trusted and deep relationships with local communities,” and can mentor youth; prevent and address bullying and rumors; prevent and resolve conflicts between groups of youth; prevent retaliation and provide restorative justice; help youth get safely between neighborhoods in conflict and school; and connect youth to needed services (p. 9).
- **Discourage use of metal detectors,** as “metal detectors and the related routine of body scans and bag searches increase student/police interactions, expand police involvement in enforcement of school rules, and create flashpoints for confrontation (Ofer et al., 2009, p. 7). While ISD 287 does not use police, the potential for conflict and confrontation exist during these types of searches.

- **Ensure student voice in creating school rules and responding when rules are broken.** Where students have a voice in school rules, there can be “greater student ownership over school rules, a greater sense of belonging to the school community, and a greater willingness to comply with the code of conduct (Ofer et al., 2009, p. 8). Students can be engaged in regular revisions to school rules and codes of conduct, as well as in mediation teams that respond when school rules are broken (p. 20). This recommendation is bolstered by other research finding that community engagement around public safety issues can prevent violence and create safety (Turner, 2020).
- **Ensure shared understanding and clear lines of authority.** The New York City schools that experienced success and safety “have similar responses to the basic questions: Who is responsible for maintaining order in the classroom? Who is in charge of ensuring students do not roam the hallways during class time? When does a school infraction warrant the involvement of law enforcement officials?” (Ofer et al., 2009, p. 17).
- **Build and maintaining cultures of trust and respect.** Successful schools in New York City all had “a culture that is built on trust and respect of all members of the school community, including ‘bad students’ that have been shunned by other schools” (Ofer et al., 2009, p. 21). Mechanisms for creating this culture included through strong leadership that supported meeting students’ nonacademic needs and positive measures to address problems (Ofer et al., 2009).

Student Safety Coach logic model

Wilder Research met with ISD 287 staff a few times to build a logic model that would serve as a framework to the evaluation.

| Inputs → | Activities → | Outputs → | Outcomes - Impact | | |
|---|--|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Student Safety Coaches (staff)</p> <p>Safe spaces, including offices</p> <p>Technology</p> <p>Trainings</p> <p>Relationships with students, staff, parents, police officers</p> <p>Funding</p> <p>Uniforms</p> | <p>SSCs:</p> <p>Participate in relevant training</p> <p>De-escalate situations affecting safety</p> <p>Engage in collaborative problem solving with students, staff, and other district stakeholders</p> <p>Use trauma-informed practices</p> <p>Lead or support restorative practices circles</p> <p>Use non-violent defensive tactics where appropriate</p> <p>Understand the use-of-force continuum</p> <p>Build trusting relationships with students, school staff, parents, and community partners</p> <p>Provide building security, including active supervision to students in school</p> <p>Provide emergency support services to students, staff, and visitors, including triage, and calling 9-1-1 when needed or directed</p> <p>Promote and reinforce positive student behavior</p> <p>Debrief problematic behavior using collaborative problem-solving</p> <p>Assist staff in observing, recording, and charting behaviors, including participating in Health and Safety team meetings, and IEP and 360 meetings as requested</p> <p>Complete incident reports</p> <p>Follow district policies and procedures</p> <p>Work collaboratively with other SSCs</p> | <p># of students responded to, by gender and race</p> <p># of incident reports</p> <p># of actions taken in response to incident, by action type</p> <p># of hours receiving training</p> <p># of hours training others</p> <p># of 360 meeting consultations</p> <p># of consultation with teachers, EAs, or administration</p> | <p>Short term – immediate response</p> <p>Students...</p> <p>Increase knowledge of how to deal with conflict</p> <p>Are supported in cooling down and processing conflict</p> <p>Return to class ready to learn and be safe</p> <p>Are supported in communicating what they need</p> <p>Are supported in developing positive behaviors</p> <p>Are supported in coping with negative emotions, conflict, and critical incidents</p> <p>School...</p> <p>Staff collaborate to respond to critical incidents without arrest, citation, or out of school time</p> | <p>Intermediate term</p> <p>Students...</p> <p>Practice behaviors to increase social connections</p> <p>Practice behaviors to deal with conflict in safe ways</p> <p>Seek positive supports to deal with emotions or behaviors</p> <p>Can name negative feelings</p> <p>Can identify some safe ways to deal with negative feelings</p> <p>School....</p> <p>Is a place where students and staff know who to ask for support in dealing with difficult emotions or behaviors</p> <p>Is a place where people prioritize de-escalating conflict</p> | <p>Long term</p> <p>Students...</p> <p>Feel more connected at school</p> <p>Behave in ways that promote safety</p> <p>Cope with negative feelings in safe ways</p> <p>School...</p> <p>Has a positive learning environment</p> <p>School buildings are safe</p> |

Student Safety Coaches in ISD 287: Staff perceptions

An online survey was distributed to approximately 955 ISD 287 staff between April 15 and May 4, 2020. While not every respondent answered each question, a total of 196 staff took the survey. The survey included close- and open-ended questions to gather their perceptions about the work of Student Safety Coaches (SSCs), their impact(s), and how the program may be improved. Below are key findings from the survey. We analyzed open-ended responses into themes, and present those themes raised by five or more respondents.

Student Safety Coaches build positive relationships and collaborate with students and staff

Of 136 respondents to the open-ended question asking staff to identify two or three impacts that SSCs have, 57 staff (42%) raised the theme that SSCs build positive relationships with students.

SSCs provide a trusting, open relationship to students where they feel safe. Often, our SSCs are people of color, and our students who look like them feel more connected with the SSCs as they have lived experiences similar to them.

They build excellent relationships with students.

SSCs build relationships with students which helps tremendously when trying to de-escalate them during and after a crisis.

Nineteen staff (14%) noted that SSCs collaborate with other district staff, and 12 (9%) raised the theme that SSCs build positive relationships with other district staff.

[SSCs] provide more support to teachers. [They] have background knowledge with many students and know them really well.

Other survey responses show that SSCs build positive relationships with students and staff and collaborate with staff (Figure 1). It is noteworthy that as questions addressed specifics of the Student Safety Coach role, such as whether they participate in team meetings, an increasing percentage of staff responded that they did not know.

1. Student Safety Coaches and relationships

| Student Safety Coaches... | Strongly agree/agree | Disagree/strongly disagree | I don't know |
|--|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Build trusting relationships with students | 78% (N=137) | 6% (N=10) | 16% (N=28) |
| Build trusting relationships with other ISD 287 staff | 71% (N=128) | 11% (N=19) | 18% (N=33) |
| Collaborate well with students to solve problems | 68% (N=118) | 10% (N=17) | 19% (N=34) |
| Are adept at collaborative problem solving with staff | 62% (N=112) | 16% (N=29) | 22% (N=39) |
| Help staff collaborate better when responding to critical incidents | 54% (N=92) | 19% (N=32) | 27% (N=45) |
| Participate in team meetings, including Health and Safety, IEP, 360, and/or debriefs when needed | 49% (N=88) | 19% (N=34) | 32% (N=58) |

Student Safety Coaches respond to and help de-escalate critical situations

In response to an open-ended question on the two or three impacts of Student Safety Coaches, 33 staff (24%) mentioned that SSCs de-escalate crises in school buildings. Other questions on the survey asked about incident response, and answers to those questions support the idea that Student Safety Coaches respond to critical incidents in helpful ways (Figure 2).

2. Student Safety Coaches and incident response

| Student Safety Coaches... | Strongly agree/agree | Disagree/strongly disagree | I don't know |
|--|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Respond to critical incidents in an appropriate amount of time | 73% (N=131) | 12% (N=21) | 16% (N=28) |
| Are effective at de-escalating situations | 74% (N=132) | 10% (N=18) | 16% (N=29) |
| Help students cool down when they are in crisis | 74% (N=130) | 9% (N=15) | 17% (N=30) |

Student Safety Coaches help students and staff in other ways

Responding to open-ended questions, themes emerged about a variety of other positive impacts that Student Safety Coaches have in the district. Staff said that:

- Student Safety Coaches are a safe place for students who are struggling (N=16; 12%).

The beauty of the work (especially at our schools) isn't when things go perfect (because they don't) but when relationships are rebuilt. Students are taught to trust and repair relationships in a safe environment. That is powerful life learning which can critically shape our students and I know our SSC's play a big role in this process.

[Student Safety Coaches] provide a neutral adult in behavioral situations, which is especially beneficial when they have previously built a positive, trusting relationship with the student. I see the safety coaches doing this on a regular basis at our site.

- Student Safety Coaches manage student behaviors, including through helping students practice positive behaviors (N=15; 11%).

SSCs give students a designated go-to person if they are struggling in class or with situation outside of school. SSC's help students process their feelings and to communicate them effectively in more situations than not. SSC's help student practice social-emotional skills on a daily basis.

- SSCs are a positive presence in district buildings, and are helpful, welcoming, and approachable (N=15; 11%).
- SSCs are proactive about engaging with students or monitoring issues (N=9; 7%).

Other questions on the survey asked for staff perceptions on a variety of the work that Student Safety Coaches do. Responses to those questions support the finding that Student Safety Coaches help students and staff in many different ways (Figure 3).

3. Student Safety Coaches and other positive impacts

| Student Safety Coaches... | Strongly agree/agree | Disagree/strongly disagree | I don't know |
|--|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Help students develop positive behaviors | 67% (N=118) | 13% (N=23) | 19% (N=34) |
| Support students in communicating their needs in positive ways | 66% (N=115) | 15% (N=26) | 19% (N=34) |
| Are knowledgeable about restorative practices | 65% (N=117) | 11% (N=19) | 24% (N=43) |
| Help with charting behaviors when needed | 36% (N=64) | 20% (N=36) | 44% (N=80) |

Student Safety Coaches contribute to a safe and productive learning environment

In open-ended responses, staff raised themes about how Student Safety Coaches contribute to a safe and productive learning environment. Staff noted that:

- Student Safety Coaches ensure the overall safety of the school building, including through monitoring halls or acting as a deterrent (N=22; 16%).
| *[1] feel an overall sense of security.* |
- Student Safety Coaches are preferable to police officers in district buildings (N=12; 9%). Staff raised this theme for a variety of reasons, including because they saw Student Safety Coaches as being less punitive or intimidating, they preferred that Student Safety Coaches do not have the power to arrest students, and said that Student Safety Coaches have a more calm presence than police officers.

Other survey questions asked for staff perceptions about whether Student Safety Coaches help create safe or productive learning environments (Figure 4). Responses here were more evenly split than to other questions. For example, about half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they feel as safe in district buildings as they did before the implementation of the Student Safety Coach program, and about 1 in 3 respondents said they did not know if fewer critical incidents result in undesirable outcomes because of Student Safety Coaches.

4. Student Safety Coaches and the learning environment

| As the result of the work of Student Safety Coaches... | Strongly agree/agree | Disagree/strongly disagree | I don't know |
|---|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| I feel safe in district buildings | 59% (N=100) | 28% (N=47) | 13% (N=22) |
| I feel at least as safe in district buildings as I did before the SSC program started ^a | 54% (N=75) | 30% (N=42) | 16% (N=23) |
| I know more about how to deal with difficult situations in ways that are safe | 52% (N=87) | 27% (N=46) | 21% (N=35) |
| Students return to class ready to be safe after a behavioral incident | 52% (N=88) | 15% (N=26) | 33% (N=55) |
| Students return to class ready to learn after a behavioral incident | 46% (N=77) | 20% (N=34) | 34% (N=57) |
| Fewer critical incidents result in out-of-class time, citation, or arrest, than before the SSC program ^a | 34% (N=48) | 31% (N=43) | 35% (N=49) |

^a These questions were only asked of staff who indicated they have been in the district before and after implementation of the SSC program.

Staff have a variety of ideas about how to improve the Student Safety Coach program

The survey asked staff an open-ended question about what changes, if any, could be made to improve the Student Safety Coach program. Additionally, some staff (N=23) identified areas for improvement when prompted to identify the impacts of the SSC program (described above). We synthesized themes and report recommendations raised by 5 or more respondents. They are:

- **Increase clarity on the role of SSCs**, including through school-wide trainings, to clarify if SSCs are available for more than just security, and so that staff do not request that SSCs do things they should not do (i.e., physically move students who have not met thresholds for being moved; N=23) This idea is bolstered by other survey findings. One question asked if staff had ever reached out to an SSC to help handle an incident, and responses included the options “no, because I need to know more about how or when to engage SSCs,” and “yes, and I would like to know more about how or when I’m supposed to engage SSCs.” Nearly 1 in 3 respondents (29%) selected these options, indicating that they’d like to know more about how or when to engage SSCs.
- **Increase proactivity of SSCs**, including through SSCs being out of their offices more, or engaging in classroom drop-ins (N=22).
- **Increase SSC partnership with staff**, including through increased responsiveness to teacher/staff feedback, increased availability for debrief and other meetings, increased SSC buy-in to help staff (N=19).

I found it difficult to get aid from them for even staff switch-outs for a few minutes since it "wasn't their job to be locked down for staff breaks." Generally I got a perception that they only helped when they wanted to.

More training on how to do their job to be more collaborative. Not overrule classroom staff on what works for the students.

- **Increase number of people in SSC role**, including female-identified SSCs (N=17).

I feel that there could be a few more safety coaches assigned to the building as there have been times/days that are behaviorally challenging and they cannot respond to all of the calls.

An expansion of the team. The only problem with the program is that there aren't enough coaches. There's two full time at the school I work at and they are overworked. We could use at two more.

I would love to see female SSCs at some point. I have been in situations where [they] asked me to stay with an escalated female student because I am a female staff.

- **Increase support available to SSCs**, including from supervisors and trainings. This support should help to improve understanding of safety protocols, restorative practices, and trauma-informed calming practices, and should address the strengths and needs of students in different programs, of younger students, and of students with autism (N=15).

With younger students, I feel as if they use more distraction and play techniques with the students which gets them back to class, yes, but does not address the underlying cause of the behavior, so the student does not learn anything from the moment.

- **Increase the positive relationships SSCs build with students**, including through engaging with students outside of crisis moments, through modeling more professional behavior, and by no longer “bribing” students with things food, money, or smartphone access (N=11).

Maybe having them come around more to see our students so the students aren't afraid when it's a time to help change their behavior.

Training on how inappropriate language/put downs affects students.

What are two or three impacts SSCs have in the schools? [They] Encourage negative behaviors, and use inappropriate language to try to relate to students (gay, r-word).

- **Better distribution throughout buildings** in order to improve response time, to be more available in specific program wings, and to increase understanding of the spaces where SSCs can be frequently called on in buildings (N=10).

I think the safety coaches should be stationed in the hallways not in an office. If the students knew that a safety coach was right out in the hallway they might think twice about leaving the classroom. Also the response time getting to an incident would be shortened.

Next steps

For too long, research illuminating the ineffectiveness and harms of policing has been overshadowed by counter-factual cultural norms that police are necessary to build safety. We began this project months before Minneapolis Police officers killed George Floyd, and write these next steps in the weeks after. During those weeks, massive nationwide protests and a riotous police response have helped disseminate more widely a research-based belief long-promoted by abolitionists and abolitionist organizations. That belief is: investment in community, and divestment from police, is necessary to create greater community safety. The Student Safety Coach program is consistent with this investment / divestment framework. Recent events point to the importance of continuing to create safety by intervening in undesirable behavior in life-affirming ways, and working to abolish the conditions under which police may seem necessary.

In this context, based on suggestions from the literature and results from the first staff survey, we recommend to:

Ensure district buy-in to using district-based methods to promote safety

Through disseminating findings here – particularly the literature on police presence in schools and how to improve school safety – staff, students, and families may be more supportive of district-based methods to create safety and intervene in undesirable student behavior.

Build understanding of the Student Safety Coach program

This recommendation takes two forms. First, the district should clearly communicate the roles, responsibilities, and methods of engagement of the SSCs to staff, students, and families. This recommendation is based in a key survey finding – that staff think this would improve the program, and that some staff also lack this understanding. It is also supported by a source in the literature that found that successful schools had shared understanding around safety, and clear lines of authority. Second, the district should continue to study the SSC program to understand its impacts, strengths, and opportunities for improvement. Next steps for research could include review of incident report data, surveys or interviews with students or families, and/or interviews with district staff and leadership.

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