Reimagining School Safety

By Heather M. Reynolds and Ron Avi Astor

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent racial justice movements have made it very apparent that our current approaches to keeping students safe and healthy in schools need major restructuring and reform. We lack mental health supports in many schools at a time when students need them most.[1] We are punishing and removing students of color from schools at much higher rates than white students, and students with disabilities are three times more likely to receive a punitive punishment than their nondisabled peers.[2] Additionally, there are strong calls from communities across the United States to remove law enforcement from schools immediately, with little planning or data-driven support. With the infusion of federal money into states and schools to help address student achievement losses and mental health challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an opportunity for real change.[3] This is an opportunity to create sustainable systems and infrastructure that help local districts address their most pressing safety needs through districtwide data-driven strategies that show long-term, positive outcomes for the entire school community.[4]

Recent data show that 14 million students in the United States attend schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.[5] The National Association of School Psychologists[6] recommends that the ratio of school psychologists to students be at least 1 for every 500 students. Only one state met this recommendation as of 2021, and over 20 states had a ratio of more than 1,500 students per school psychologist.[7] There is no national strategy or infrastructure to lower the ratio of students to counselors, social workers, nurses, and other helping professionals to ensure more supports are available to struggling students.[8]

In addition to diverting resources that could fund better mental health supports, punitive school security and discipline policies have a strong negative impact on students of color and students with disabilities. More specifically, suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to law enforcement, and punitive discipline rates are disproportionately and consistently higher for students of color and students with disabilities in urban, suburban, and rural communi-

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE AUSTIN

ties across the United States, beginning even before students enter kindergarten.[9] We should be asking what our schools need to be welcoming and supportive to all. And more importantly, how can policymakers help support that vision with infrastructure, training, and funding to ensure success and sustainability over time?

Shifting the Focus to Social, Emotional, and Mental Health, and a Positive School Climate

Reenvisioning education and schools across the United States must account for the large bodies of research showing that schools with strong, caring, culturally supportive, and positive climates can not only address issues of ongoing victimization but also prevent students from being victimized.[10] Little evidence suggests that law enforcement strategies have prevented school shootings or made schools feel safer for students.[11] However, significant research has highlighted the negative impact that security, law enforcement, and punitive approaches can have on school climate, including lowering students' sense of belonging and safety and academic performance.[12] These negative outcomes disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities, which can lead to social isolation, disengagement, and dropping out of school.[13] Given the existing evidence, policies need to shift from "hardening" practices (such as more police and metal detectors) to strategies that foster a positive community and civil relationships in schools.[14]

This change requires a shift of funding and support from policing, punishment, and surveillance to long-term investments in holistic prevention and empowerment of schools and communities. Given wide local, regional, and state variation in populations, the most effective and appropriate interventions are driven by local school safety assessments, capacity building, integration of academic and social goals, partnerships with community organizations, consideration of the voices of all school stakeholders, and collaborations with universities.[15]

The arguments to fund security measures in schools are generally based on fear, opinion, and often, political views.[16] In most school shootings with mass casualties, schools had armed personnel either on campus at the time of the shooting or there within minutes,[17] and their presence failed to prevent the shootings or stop the shooters from using weapons on school grounds (e.g., Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and Robb Elementary School). Similarly, most mass shootings have occurred in schools that had security cameras, security protocols, and electronic monitoring systems.[18] And finally, most shooters were students or former students who were familiar with the layout of the school rather than random strangers targeting a school.[19]

More than 20,000 school resource officers (SROs) work in schools across the country, which doesn't include the presence of armed security or "guardians" who are not active-duty law enforcement officers.[20] Federal funding (COPS in Schools and other grants) during the past several decades has encouraged schools to hire active-duty law enforcement to work full time in schools. Research on the effectiveness of SROs is mixed, and no definitive data have indicated that the presence of an SRO deters or lowers casualties in a mass school shooting.[21]

However, evidence suggests that punitive disciplinary policies and the presence of a law enforcement officer in schools can affect the numbers of students being arrested, with devastating effects on students of color and students with disabilities.[22]

Although Black students represent 15 percent of student enrollment, they represent 29 percent of students referred to law enforcement and 32 percent of students subjected to school-related arrest.[23] Regarding students with disabilities, the rate of school arrests is three times that of students without disabilities, and it increases exponentially when police are present on campus.[24]

Despite federal and state funding and incentives, most states have very limited guidance and legislation related to SRO training, and as of 2018, 18 states had "no laws on SRO certification, use,

Our Children Can't Wait

This article is adapted from chapter 11 of *Our Children Can't Wait: The Urgency of Reinventing Education Policy in America*. In this edited volume, scholars challenge inequality as something inevitable in America's schools and society, focusing on new, broader social policy responses to address persistent disparities in academic outcomes apparent by race and income. We explore the perspectives of multiple experts on interrelated policies beyond schools that profoundly affect students, such as neighborhood conditions, public health, community resources, housing, air quality, school safety, and segregation. An education policy playbook that looks both within and outside the school walls for solutions that begin to dismantle the entrenched forces of systemic racism in our country has never deserved greater attention or focus. That redemptive journey starts with making an unapologetic commitment to our young people. Our children can't wait.

–JOSEPH P. BISHOP

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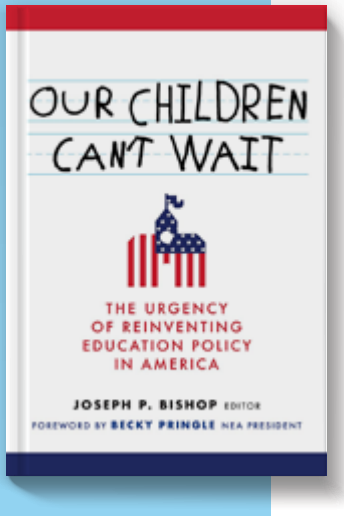

or training."[25] The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the largest training organization for school-based police in the United States, recently released a statement about the importance of "local and collaborative" decision-making that focuses on "weighing the risk of harm" with potential benefits prior to hiring law enforcement to work in schools.[26]

Creating a Positive, Supportive, and Welcoming School Climate

A large body of research has demonstrated the positive impact of whole-school and whole-child prevention approaches that focus on developing and maintaining a welcoming and supportive climate and minimizing the removal of students from school.[27] A positive school climate is characterized by respectful student, teacher, and staff relationships; teacher and peer support; clear, fair, and consistent rules and disciplinary policies; support for diversity and inclusion; effective school-home communication; and student engagement and a sense of belongingness in school and school activities.[28] Sharing some of the same core principles, social and emotional learning refers to supports and processes that help "children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."[29]

School safety researchers know that there are promising, data-driven findings indicating that programs that focus on schoolwide or districtwide efforts to improve school climate and promote social and emotional learning can lower levels of victimization in school and increase feelings of safety for all students.[30] Strong evidence suggests that efforts to improve school climate or promote social and emotional learning are most impactful when they are schoolwide or districtwide and involve all stakeholders. When these programs are implemented with consistency across a district, all students experience significant improvements in academic and victimization outcomes, along with a reduction in discrepancies in academic achievement and discipline among students of color, students with lower socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities.[31]

> Policies need to shift from "hardening" practices to strategies that foster a positive community and civil relationships in schools.

Restorative justice techniques and comprehensive threat-assessment teams are a promising alternative to punitive, zero-tolerance policies when these programs are part of the comprehensive safety plan for a school or district.[32] Restorative justice practices focus on improving the overall culture and climate of the school through engaging in conflict resolution and problem solving; developing and nurturing positive relationships in the school environment; reinforcing positive communication strategies; encouraging all students to be actively involved in their school; and promoting, teaching, and reinforcing respect for one another.[33] Restorative practices, when clearly structured and used schoolwide, can effectively disrupt discrepancies in exclusionary punishment practices based on racial and disability status.[34]

Another effective alternative to zero-tolerance policies is comprehensive threat assessment.[35] Teams of trained school professionals use a step-by-step procedure to gather information and assess threats as either transient (not serious or intentional) or substantive (clear intent to carry out the threat). Appropriate interventions and supports are then instituted based on the needs of the student who made the threat and the safety needs of other students.[36] When threat assessment is implemented on a districtwide basis, multiple studies[37] have shown lower suspension rates across all racial and ethnic groups, a more positive school climate, fewer instances of bullying and violence, and increases in teachers feeling safe; one study found a 79 percent decrease in bullying.[38]

Many schools have started to include positive social and emotional learning and climate measures but have not removed preexisting punitive approaches. The simultaneous use of punitive and positive approaches to safety in the same school or district can lead to confusion about student discipline and send inconsistent messages to students about behaviors and consequences. Rather than funding competing programs or policies with conflicting messages, there is a need to develop a unified whole-school approach to safety.[39] It is critical that school board members, superintendents, administrators, and teachers have access to research and training, both at the pre-service level and through professional development, on the devastating impact exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices can have on certain groups of students.[40] Adding social and emotional learning or a program focused on improving climate to a school or district while still utilizing policing or punitive discipline does not make sense, is confusing, and is not data driven. Yet many districts opt for both approaches as a form of political compromise without consideration of the mixed message this creates for the entire school community.

Key Components of an "Optimal" Vision of School Safety

The National Association of School Psychologists,[41] in collaboration with NASRO and several other professional organizations, introduced recommendations that would allow districts to create and maintain comprehensive, research-based school safety policies. These recommendations include flexible and sustainable

funding streams that allow schools to address their most pressing safety needs by promoting school-community partnerships, multi-tiered support systems, inter- and intra-agency collaborations, and the use of evidence-based standards.[42] Partnerships, assessment, and sustainability are critical to the success of any school safety program.

From a policy standpoint, funding, flexibility, incentives, and infrastructure to promote collaborations between universities and local decision-makers would make it more viable for districts to use data from a wide range of stakeholders to address their most pressing school safety needs. These partnerships should be integrated into the curricula of teacher-, social worker-, school psychologist-, principal-, and superintendent-preparation programs in universities. Such partnerships would set up a system for key school personnel to develop an understanding of how to create welcoming, safe, and supportive schools through procedures and structures for collecting and using local data and constituent voices to drive safety policies and procedures in every school. Creating and sustaining infrastructure in preparation programs to encourage local data-driven decisions also would create an opportunity to address issues of school safety in terms of race, gender, disability status, policing and social justice, and punitive safety policies in an academic setting. In addition, this would help university-based preparation programs build capacity to help school professionals understand data-driven, welcoming, and growth-oriented school safety policies and practices.[43] And local decision-makers need to be able to advocate for and have resources and funding available to support a whole-school approach to safety, which is more likely to have an impact and be sustained over time.[44]

A vast literature indicates what works and what doesn't work in the field of school safety. Drawing from evidence-based programs and policies that have a positive impact on perceptions of safety in schools[45] will help policymakers focus on the best ways to address their community's unique school and community safety needs.[46] Federal policies and funding that encourage schools to examine strategies for removing zero-tolerance, policing, and punitive policies are vital for a seismic shift to occur in how we approach school safety. It is critical that local stakeholders and decision-makers have the support of university collaborators to collect and analyze their own data and make evidence-based decisions that are appropriate for their district. Decades of research show that any "hardening" of security efforts needs to consider the potential impact on the climate of schools and the disproportionate impact punitive discipline can have on students of color and students with disabilities in terms of academic success and feelings of connection to school.[47]

Federal and state policymakers need to direct legislation and funding away from school policing to more holistic, supportive, and nonpunitive practices. There are some promising signs, including the Every Student Succeeds Act allowing some flexibility for states to examine school climate and social-emotional variables to help meet the reporting requirements for school quality or student success.[48] Although not required, departments of education at the state level can choose to look at school climate and/or social and emotional learning through support from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments and/or apply for federal grant opportunities such as the School Climate Transformation Grant.[49] This is a promising step, but the funding for these initiatives is still miniscule when compared to the funding allocated to school-based policing. Incentivizing or requiring all states to evaluate school climate through providing infrastructure and financial support for collaborations between districts and researchers would likely increase the number of districts that include these variables in academic and safety-related discussions.

Restorative justice practices can disrupt discrepancies in exclusionary punishment practices based on racial and disability status.

Years of research show us the value and effectiveness of inclusive and comprehensive safety programs and policies, prevention and investment in data-driven practices, and the creation of welcoming and supportive schools and districts.[50] Empowering districts to invest in long-term, research-based solutions can begin with national calls to examine punitive disciplinary policies in every district and to consider holistic and empowering models for safety. There are so much data to spark this conversation (e.g., Civil Rights Data Collection, Welcoming Empowerment Monitoring Approach). We now need structures and incentives for bringing decision-makers and researchers together over time for meaningful and goal-oriented interactions. Encouraging discussion and partnerships in the area of school safety is a key component of creating and sustaining holistic, evidence-based, financially viable, relevant, and data-driven school safety solutions that work for all. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2023/reynolds_astor.

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