School Safety and Student Discipline

Why Are These Issues Important?

Every day, families send children to school placing their trust in the hands of teachers, principals, and other school staff, hoping that their children will be safe and able to learn and thrive. To help make sure this happens, governors, chiefs, legislators, and other policymakers will likely need to navigate complex decisions around school safety and student discipline. Many of these conversations are politically charged and partisan in nature in part because they implicate race, gun access, and personal freedom and are deeply emotional due to the high stakes of protecting students. School safety and student discipline are separate issues, but policymakers should understand how they are related and how policies that address one issue may affect the other.

Guiding Questions for State Leaders

To help inform strategy, state leaders can consider:

Policy Leadership

- What do our state and local data regarding school discipline or student safety suggest about potential challenges and solutions? How does this vary by district?
- What are constituents' (including students, families, teachers, principals, researchers, law enforcement officers, and mental health experts) greatest concerns around school safety or student discipline? How can we respond to them?
- Who else at the state level — which other agencies and organizations, including non-profit and juvenile justice leaders — are responsible for student safety and/or discipline? How can we collaborate?
- What are likely to be the greatest barriers to advancing change on these issues? How can we overcome these barriers and find common ground?

- Who in our state is best equipped to convene groups invested in this topic across differences?

Engagement

- How will we proactively communicate about these issues to our constituents, including students? How will students, parents, and community leaders be heard by state policymakers?

Resources and Oversight

- How much are school safety and discipline currently costing our state? How much will proposed changes cost? How much would proposed actions save? What else is needed to support these changes (e.g., training, guidance, technical assistance) at the local level?
- What additional research is needed to help inform our state's approach to policymaking? What existing research can we bring to bear from neutral authorities?

State leaders planning to take action on school safety and student discipline issues should begin by engaging stakeholders — including students, families, law enforcement leaders, educators, community and civil rights groups, and others — to understand what issues they think are important to prioritize, what their concerns are, and how they can work together to develop or improve existing policies.

To support these conversations with stakeholders, it is helpful to understand background and research on school safety and student discipline issues, promising practices from states, and contested issues that may emerge during discussions.

Background

Much of the recent focus on school safety has centered around violent incidents, driven by high-profile and tragic school shootings and a sense of increased bullying (including cyber-bullying).

With respect to school discipline, recent debates have primarily focused on exclusionary discipline, racial disproportionality, the school-to-prison pipeline, and alternative discipline strategies.

Though the issues are interrelated and often discussed together, issues of student safety and student discipline are distinct. School safety results are an essential gauge of effective discipline policy; students need to be safe from harm and bullying and to feel safe in order to invest fully in the academic mission of school.

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act[1] requires states to include at least one measure of school quality or student success (SQSS) in their accountability systems and has added new reporting requirements for states and districts that focus on discipline and safety (including suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement).

Research

- Reported incidents of school-based victimization have been on the decline (see chart on page 3),[i] though there continue to be questions and concerns about the reliability of data on school safety and student discipline.[ii]

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1 The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is the most recent authorization of the nation's largest K-12 education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). For a comprehensive overview of ESSA, see the National Association of Secondary School Principals overview: https://www.nassp.org/policy-advocacy-center/resources/essa-toolkit/essa-fact-sheets/

School Discipline and Student Safety Glossary

Student discipline: The system of rules and expectations, behavioral strategies, and consequences to maintain order in schools.

School safety: The school-related activities that keep students safe from overt and subtle instances of violence, bullying, harassment, as well as drug use.

Early warning system: A way of using data to predict or flag students who are at risk of violence. This term is also used to refer to a separate approach to identifying students who are academically at risk.

Exclusionary discipline: Disciplinary actions that remove students from the classroom, such as suspensions and expulsions.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): A multi-tiered framework of supports to improve student behavior.

Racial disproportionality in discipline: Disciplining indigenous students and students of color at higher rates than their white peers.

School resource officer: A law enforcement officer serving in schools.

School-to-prison pipeline: The connection between the criminalization of student behavior in schools and their increased chances of being incarcerated later in life.

Zero tolerance policy: Responding to major and minor infractions with strict enforcement of predetermined penalties without consideration of context or extenuating circumstances.
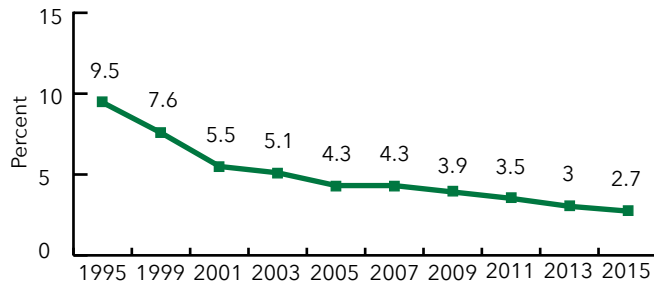
Percentage of students ages 12-18 who reported victimization at school in the previous 6 months

- Evidence suggests that improving school climate, or the overall character or "feel" of the school, can support safer schools and can include efforts like reducing bullying and engaging families.[iii]
- There is not a strong evidentiary base linking increased school safety to arming teachers,[iv] increasing the number of School Resource Officers (SROs),[v] or adding metal detectors.[vi]
- In K-12 public schools there are widespread disparities in exclusionary discipline (suspensions, expulsions, arrests) by race, gender, and disability status.[vii]
  » Black students, for instance, make up only 15% of public school students, but represent 39% of those suspended from school.[viii] Experts most commonly attribute these disparities not to increased rates of misbehavior by students of color, boys, and students with disabilities, but rather to policies, procedures and adult mindsets that have disparately negative consequences for these groups.[ix] However, others assert that this explanation does not appropriately account for potential differences in student behavior.[x]

Promising Practices

Although every state leader must weigh their local context when making policy decisions, some promising practices from other states may help to inform their approach.

Improve school climate:

There is a broad understanding that for learning to occur, classrooms — and schools more broadly — need to be safe and supportive environments. School and district leaders can work with parents and the broader school community to increase students' sense of safety, such as by implementing initiatives to address bullying and to increase family engagement. State leaders can help to measure school climate by procuring student, family, and teacher surveys and providing trainings to district leaders on how to use survey data to increase engagement and improve school climate. States can also use new flexibilities under ESSA to encourage schools to focus on improving school climate. ESSA gives states the ability to factor in a range of student success measures, including school climate, to hold schools accountable. Eight states thus far are including school climate data in their school accountability models.[xi]

Alternative discipline models:

Implementing evidence-based alternative discipline programs can decrease rates of school-based violence and exclusionary discipline referrals without making schools less safe. Restorative practices, which are focused on taking responsibility for one's actions and strengthening relationships between individuals, like the victim and the offender in a disciplinary incident, rather than relying on punitive or exclusionary discipline, are a popular alternative model.[xii] Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) is another common model, which uses multiple "tiers" of evidence-based practices (some delivered to all students, others targeted to students needing more intensive support) to help improve social skills and behavior.[xiii] States can provide funding and training to districts and schools interested in implementing these models, such as **Colorado's** law that makes restorative justice available to all students in the state, and track results relative to places that do not implement these strategies to support continuous improvement.[xiv] Supporting training and other implementation costs is critical.

Trainings and response planning:

Many states now require schools and districts to collaborate with law enforcement in the development of crisis response plans and to take part in regular drills designed to improve coordination of response to crisis incidents. States like **Indiana**[xv] and **Oklahoma** have created school safety

training academies, which provide trainings to school and district leaders as well as their community partners, on how to best design and implement school safety strategies and provide guidance and incentives.

Early warning systems and threat assessment:

The continuous examination of behavior, violent incidences to monitor and looking proactively for students who need attention can help school and local leaders to direct resources toward areas of need before they escalate to disciplinary infractions or substantive threats to safety.[2] **Virginia**, for instance, has adopted a statewide policy directing local school boards to establish threat assessment teams that utilize practices in line with statewide model policies, including the use of threat assessment models designed to ensure only the most serious and likely threats are escalated.[xvi]

Mental health supports:

Programs designed to support students' mental health, such as reducing bullying and implementing trauma-informed practices, can improve school climate and safety, which in turn can increase students' likelihood of reporting potential threats.[xvii] States can also increase access to school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and wraparound services (in some cases, utilizing Medicaid to obtain reimbursement for eligible students). States can connect district and school leaders with resources and trainings on evidence-based interventions and use the bully pulpit to elevate consciousness of bullying and school safety. **Nevada** and **Wisconsin** have both implemented anti-bullying programs connected to mental health supports to improve school climate,[xviii] and the **Louisiana** Department of Education is partnering with the Louisiana Department of Health to increase support for mental health in schools.[xix]

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2   Notably, "early warning system" also refers to an approach to identifying students most likely to fall behind academically at key points in their education, and is not related to early warning systems for school violence.

Remaining Issues

In order to lead in this area, state leaders will need to understand where there are differences of opinion to bring people together.

Arming teachers:

Proponents of this approach believe that arming teachers will help prevent school shootings by having a deterrent effect on would-be attackers or help to disrupt a school shooting in progress. Opponents of arming teachers believe these policies will make schools less safe, both by introducing the possibility of someone accessing and misusing a teacher's gun to shoot others, or by producing further chaos that prevents first responder teams from identifying the shooter. This risk may be particularly fraught for students and teachers of color. There are also cost implications regarding training obligations and liability insurance. States may differentiate these policies based on schools unique circumstances — in the case of rural schools, for instance, where police officers are not within quick response distance.

Strengthening school infrastructure:

Supporters of installing metal detectors in schools believe it can prevent weapons from entering into a school building, while critics of the policy argue that metal detectors make schools feel less safe and more "prison-like." Research on the impacts of metal detectors in schools suggest there is insufficient evidence that detectors increase school safety, and a body of research does suggest that detectors make students feel less safe.[xx] Many schools also restrict access and streamline a single point of entry to schools through a buzz-in/vestibule system or a limited number of entrances, though there is limited evidence showing these initiatives are effective.[xxi] Because existing school design is so varied, solutions must be, as well.

Employing school resource officers:

Of the various proposals to increase school safety, parents are most supportive of school resource officers (SROs) in schools.[xxii] However, there is not broad agreement on the role of SROs; some claim they can make schools safer,

while other data show they increase students' likelihood of being arrested and charged with crimes, and there is no evidence to indicate whether they reduce violent incidents in schools.[xxiii] There is also concern around racial disproportionality in school-based referrals and arrests by SROs.[xxiv]

Addressing exclusionary discipline (suspensions, expulsions, arrests):

There is debate about the effectiveness of exclusionary discipline, which proponents contend allows teachers to reinforce clear behavior expectations while limiting the negative impact of distractions and unsafe behaviors in the classroom.[xxv] Critics argue that exclusionary discipline does not improve student behavior or school climate and leads to lost instruction,[xxvi] which impede chances of academic

and life success, and contend it disproportionately affects students of color and can set students on the school-to-prison pipeline.

Sharing data:

While there has been support for different agencies and service providers (such as school districts, mental health providers, and law enforcement) to share information about students who may pose a threat to school safety, some stakeholders are concerned that this information-sharing could infringe on students' privacy rights and may disproportionately impact members of particular groups (particularly students of color, immigrant and undocumented youth, and students with disabilities). Strong state leadership and clear safeguards in policy could facilitate more effective and appropriate data sharing.

Resources

- **Aspen Education & Society Program, Council of Chief State School Officers**, Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs (Commitment #9, "Improve Conditions for Learning")

- **Council of State Governments**, Realizing the Full Vision of School Discipline Reform: A Framework for Statewide Change

- **Education Commission of the States**
  - » Common Recs From State School Security Task Forces
  - » Keeping Students Safe: A Review of Governors' School Safety Priorities
  - » State Policy Tracking

- **National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments**
  - » Addressing the Root Causes of Disparities in School Discipline
  - » Safe Place to Learn
  - » School Climate Improvement Toolkits

- **National Institute of Justice**, States' Roles in Keeping Schools Safe: Opportunities and Challenges for State School Safety Centers and Other Actors

For full citations and additional information, please visit www.aspeninstitute.org/eduleadership.