



Senate Select Committee on Violence in Schools & School Security
Summary of Oral Testimony - Morgan Craven, Texas Appleseed
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Study school security options and resources, including, but not limited to, the school marshal program, school police officers, armed school personnel, the Texas School Safety Center, and other training programs to determine what improvements can be made to provide school districts and charter schools with more robust security options.

The recent school shootings in Parkland, Florida and Santa Fe, Texas, have lead to concerns from students, parents, and educators regarding campus safety issues. Unfortunately, some of the responses to these concerns have included bringing back harmful zero tolerance policies and increasing the presence of law enforcement in schools. While this might feel like an appropriate solution in the moment, research shows that these approaches can actually harm students and campus climates, rather than keep schools safe.

With an increased police presence, we risk involving police officers in routine discipline issues that should be handled by school administrators or other trained professionals, instead of focusing law enforcement resources on true emergencies and safety threats. Harsh discipline measures have been shown to increase the likelihood that students will experience immediate- and long-term harms, including trauma, school dropout and future justice system involvement.¹ Additionally, an increase in the presence of law enforcement can impact school climates, making students feel alienated from educators, staff, and their surroundings.² This alienation can make it harder to form important supportive relationships between students and adults, compromising the effectiveness of other prevention, intervention, and school safety strategies.

¹ Fabelo, Tony et al., *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement* (2011).

² Nance, Jason, *Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, [Washington University Law Review](#), 2016.

If we go backwards and begin to rely on outdated zero tolerance policies, we ignore student and educator needs, potentially making underlying issues worse. These approaches not only impact individual students, but can create negative and harsh school climates, reducing school safety, not increasing it. Further, these policies and, indeed, all punitive discipline practices, are unfairly used against Black students and students with disabilities at disproportionately high rates.

Policy Recommendations

1. Reserve law enforcement resources for emergencies and other safety concerns:

While it is important for police officers to respond to safety threats and emergencies in schools, educators and administrators often rely on them, inappropriately, to address routine discipline issues. This is a misuse of law enforcement resources and can lead to harmful interactions between law enforcement and students. Further, this approach can actually be antithetical to the goal of improving school safety if students feel they or their friends will be punished harshly if they are experiencing a problem.

The role of police officers should be clearly defined in the law, school rules and policies, and any contracts or memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that exist between school districts and local law enforcement agencies. It should be clear to everyone that officers should only be called upon to address emergency situations and other real safety concerns.

Instead of allocating funds to increase the presence of law enforcement, schools should be urged to hire more support staff like counselors and social workers, implement evidence-based threat assessment tools, and adopt research-based prevention and intervention strategies like restorative practices and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

2. Eliminate the use of zero tolerance policies: Research shows that zero tolerance policies that push kids out of school through suspensions, alternative school placements, and expulsions, can have detrimental short-term and long-term effects that can pose a significant threat to students' life chances as well as to school safety. In choosing which strategies to adopt in schools, the potential impacts of policy proposals on all children should be considered, in addition to the best practices that enable school safety. Instead of relying on punitive school discipline, schools should be asking what might be going on in the student's life or in the school community that caused a certain behavior. Additionally, exclusionary approaches need to be limited so that students feel comfortable confiding in adults, without fear of punishment.

- 3. Provide training and access to research-based behavior supports and threat assessment tools:** Having access to and training for an evidence-based threat assessment system and research-based behavior supports are essential to building strong relationships and ensuring positive school climates. Programs like Restorative Practices and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) can help educators to manage classrooms, properly assess student needs, and avoid relying on overly-harsh and discriminatory discipline practices. Once challenging behavior is identified, underlying issues can be addressed and potential threats to school safety can be prevented.

Having an evidence-based threat assessment system in place ensures an appropriate and proportional response to student behavior and eliminates the need for unnecessary and harmful zero tolerance policies, suspensions, DAEP placements, and justice system contact.