

# BACK TO SCHOOL SAFETY

## WHAT TO KNOW & QUESTIONS TO ASK

Many students, parents, and educators have concerns about how to keep their campuses safe. This flier will help explain what works to create safe schools and what can actually be harmful for students.

### **What can schools and districts do to keep students and staff safe?**

Schools must work to create positive school climates where there are strong relationships between students and between students and adults. In schools with positive climates, students feel comfortable talking about their lives, asking for help, and telling an adult when a friend needs help. Counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and other mental and behavioral health professionals can help. Programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Restorative Practices are also important in school communities and can help to ensure that everyone on campus gets the guidance, supports, and services they need. School district and campus administrators should be urged to adopt and support these important programs.

### **Should there be more police officers in schools?**

Increasing police presence on school campuses is not an effective response to concerns regarding school safety. Existing law enforcement resources should be used only for emergencies and safety concerns, not discipline. When police are used to address problems that school administrators, educators, counselors, or other trained professionals should be handling, they may rely on tools that are harmful to students, including arrests, use of force (like tasers and pepper spray), or ticketing. These approaches can increase the risk that students will drop out, experience trauma, and feel unsafe in schools. Black and Latino children are more likely than their peers to experience police contact, even though they are not more likely to misbehave. Students with disabilities are also more likely to interact with school police, even though they have needs that should be addressed in other ways.

### **What does it mean to “harden schools”?**

“Hardening schools” refers to changing a school physically to include “security measures” like metal detectors, locks, and cameras. Some of these measures can actually make students feel less safe because they create climates where students feel that they are being monitored and controlled, rather than supported. This could prevent students from feeling comfortable speaking with an adult in their school about their concerns. Tools like metal detectors, which can be expensive, can force students to gather in large groups as they wait to enter the school building, creating additional safety concerns and practical issues for starting the school day on time.

### **What are the problems with taking a “zero tolerance” approach to school discipline?**

“Zero tolerance” means that when school administrators or teachers believe that students have misbehaved, they automatically punish them or refer them to police. Some students are exhibiting normal, age-appropriate behavior which is labeled as misbehavior; other students may be experiencing challenges at home or school that should be addressed by a counselor, social worker, or other professional. Punishing them may make those challenges worse and may make it more difficult for students to succeed in school. Research shows that zero tolerance hurts student outcomes, inhibits students from talking to adults about serious matters, and can make underlying causes of behavior worse. Unnecessary punishment, referrals to law enforcement, and arrests have been shown to increase following violence in schools. School districts should adopt other approaches, like behavior threat assessments, to make sure they respond appropriately to students.

## Learning More About Your School's Policies

Here are some **questions that you can ask your campus and district administrators** to make sure they are making choices that keep students safe and are not spending valuable resources on approaches that do not work:

### Supporting Students

1. How will the school/district use counselors, social workers, school psychologists, nurses, and other mental and behavioral health professionals to support students?
  - a. How will you make sure that these professionals are not focusing most of their time on academics and testing?
2. Do you support programs like Restorative Practices, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)?
  - a. What resources will you invest in these programs, and when will that investment happen?

### Police in Schools

1. Will more police officers be present in my school?
2. How many police officers will have a regular presence in my school?
3. Where will police officers be stationed?
4. Will police officers be expected to walk around inside the school (in halls, cafeterias, and classrooms) or will they be outside of the school and called in only for safety threats and emergencies?
5. What are the duties of school police officers?
6. Where are the written rules and policies that describe and limit those duties?
7. Will police officers be prevented from getting involved in routine discipline issues that are not real safety threats?
8. What type of training do school police officers at the campus or in the district get?
9. Who will review instances when police officers are involved with students (like use of force, arrests, and issuing complaints or tickets)?
10. Can we create a committee so that parents can be involved in hiring, examining data, and reviewing complaints about school police officers?
11. Does the campus or district keep data about when school police officers interact with students (like use of force, arrests, and issuing complaints or tickets)?
12. Will the campus or district commit to publishing data each month, broken down by the race of the student and whether the student has a disability?

### Zero Tolerance

1. What is the position of the school/district on zero tolerance (using suspensions, alternative school placements, or law enforcement automatically)?
2. Will the school/district adopt a behavior threat assessment system to figure out when threats of violence are serious (and should be reported to police) to make sure that students are not punished unnecessarily?