

# GUARDING OUR MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCES

## Comparing the Staffing of Counselors and Mental Health Professionals to Police in Texas Schools

### SCHOOL SAFETY IS ABOUT GOOD SCHOOL CLIMATE

Texas is engaged in an important dialogue concerning school safety that includes a discussion of how state and local resources should be prioritized. While hardening and school policing are part of this conversation, research tells us that ensuring safe, supportive schools requires us to consider more than physical security and monitoring.

Creating appropriately-secured physical spaces is just a small part of what must be done to achieve school safety. To ensure safe, supportive schools Texas should prioritize building strong relationships between members of campus communities, fostering positive school climates, identifying the academic *and* behavioral needs of students, providing counseling, mental, and behavioral health supports and services, and building integrated systems of data collection, identification, prevention, intervention, and referral services.

To create safe schools, state and school district budgets and grant distribution criteria should prioritize prevention and intervention. Funds should be devoted to research-based approaches that ensure that individual students and entire school communities thrive. In an effort to understand where Texas schools most need resources, Appleseed analyzed statewide data to determine where gaps exist.

### FINDINGS

- **Texas schools need more counseling & mental health resources.** Few Texas districts are meeting recommended ratios for counselors and mental health professionals, and districts are unevenly resourced, leaving students in some districts at a disadvantage.
- **Texas schools have heavily invested in policing and security,** with a focused analysis of local data from 80 districts showing that their average student-to-police ratio is comparable to that of a mid-sized city.
- **Minority students are more heavily policed:** at least 43 percent of majority minority districts have a law enforcement or security presence, while only 12 percent of majority White districts do. This can lead to disparate involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems.
- **Some Texas districts have more police officers than counselors.** While 49 percent of the districts that Appleseed analyzed have counselor to police ratios of 3:1 or better, some districts employ more school police than counselors. Budgets reflect this, with some districts spending significantly more, per student, on security and monitoring than on guidance and counseling.

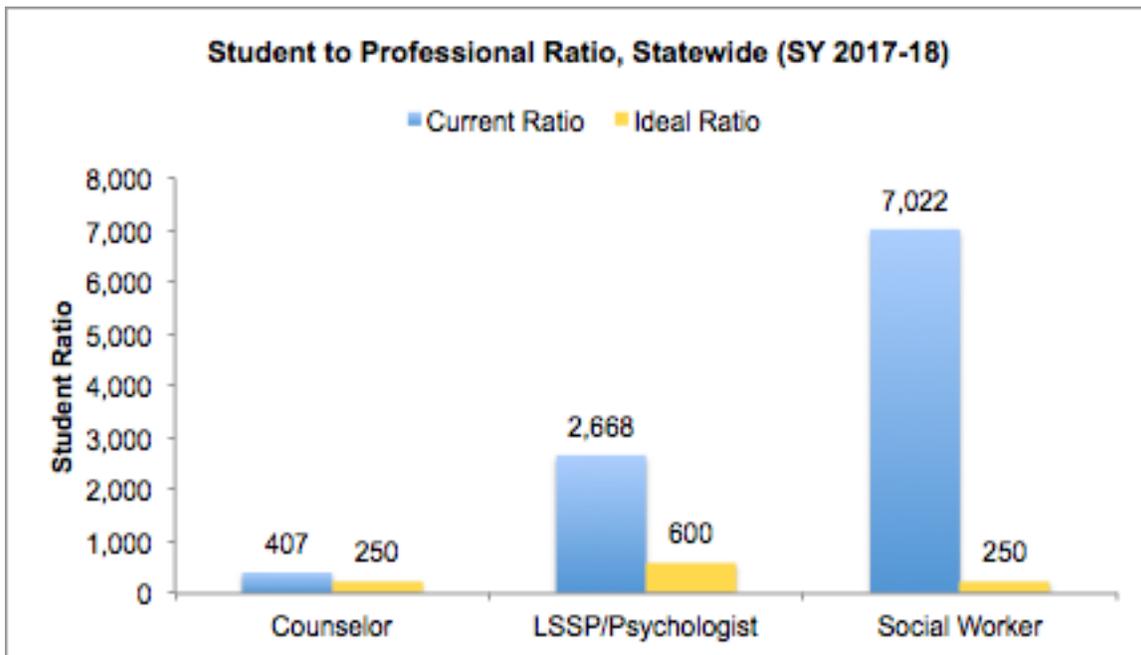
## FINDING: TEXAS SCHOOLS NEED MORE COUNSELING & MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES



There are many people that contribute to safe, and supportive school communities. Having well-trained staff inside the school building who are dedicated to creating positive school climates and have the resources and institutional support to do so is critical to success. In this report, we focus on three important professionals who are needed to maintain strong campuses by integrating services and identifying and responding to individual needs: counselors, social workers, and Licensed Specialists in School Psychology (LSSPs).

Our analysis found that the majority of Texas schools fall short of the recommended ratios for counselors and other mental health professionals. In the 2017-2018 school year, there were 16,095 counseling and mental health professionals (CMHPs) employed by Texas districts, representing an 8.7% increase in CMHPs from the 2014-2015 school year and a 5% increase in the ratio of professionals to students.

When broken out by professional type, the most common is a general counselor, accounting for 82% of all employed counseling and mental health professionals. There were approximately 407 students enrolled for every 1 counselor employed. Conversely, for psychological associates, there were 122,720 students for every 1 psychological associate, 7,022 students for every 1 social worker employed, and 2,668 students for every licensed specialist in school psychology (LSSP).

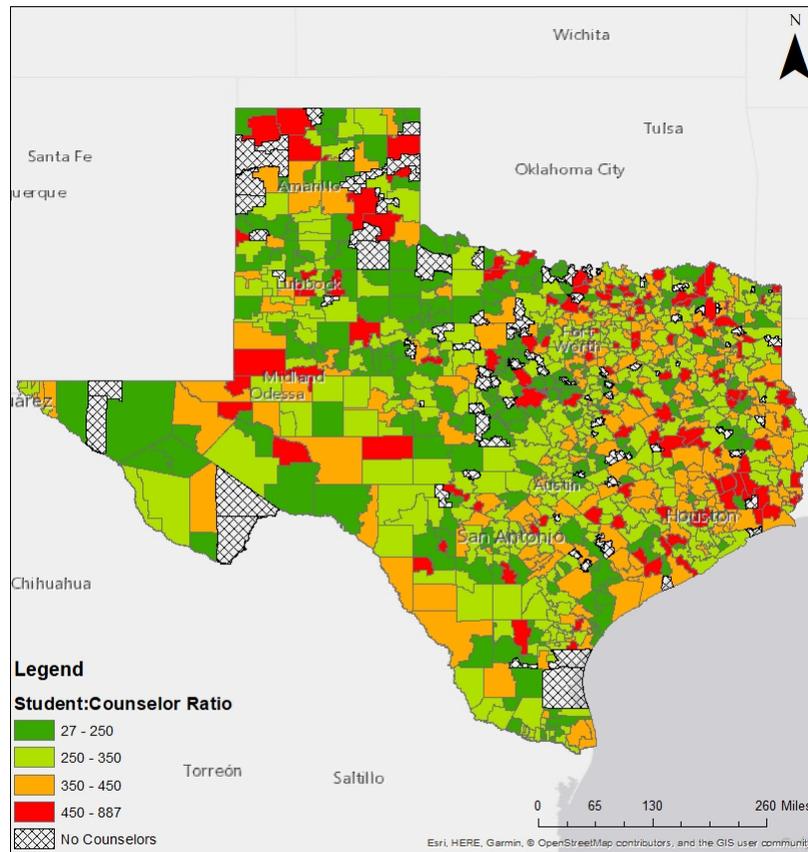


In order to meet the overall recommended ratio of 250:1 students to counselors and mental health professionals, Texas schools would need to hire at least 5,503 professionals. By type, in order to reach the ideal ratio, Texas schools would need to hire at least 8,341 new counselors, 6,975 new LSSP/Psychologists, and 20,830 new social workers.

## TEXAS DISTRICTS ARE UNEVENLY RESOURCED

Some of Texas' school districts are closer to the recommended ratios than others. The map below looks at ratios for combined counseling and mental health professionals in Texas districts.

**Texas Student to Counselor/Mental Health Professional Ratio (2017-18)**



Sources: Counselor data taken from open records requests to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Enrollment data taken from TEA website. School district shapefile taken from TEA Public Open Data website.

In the 2017-18 school year, 155 districts (13 percent) reported having zero counselors or mental health professionals. 94 of these were traditional districts, and 61 were charter schools. Most of the districts with zero professionals were in the Amarillo region, followed by Fort Worth. The majority of school districts (59 percent) that reported having zero professionals were rural.

In Texas, school-based counselors are required to perform a number of functions, including:

- implementing guidance curriculum and comprehensive services for all students in the school,
- providing responsive services to address individual student needs, including prevention, intervention, and crisis-related services;
- guiding students and families through individual planning related to education, career, personal success and social development, and
- providing school-wide system support by coordinating resources to benefit the campus community.

When all counseling and mental health professionals are combined and considered against a 250:1 ratio, only 261 districts, or 22 percent, meet this ratio. Fifty-nine percent of these were classified as rural (having 300 or fewer students) – their low enrollment means that they do not have to hire as many professionals to meet the recommended ratio. However, even some districts with higher enrollment met the ratio.

**Top 10 Districts with Highest Enrollment that Met a 250:1  
Counselor + Mental Health Professional to Student Ratio, 2017-18**

Rank	District	Enrollment	Counselors & Mental Health Professionals	Student:CMHP Ratio
1	Klein ISD	53,068	246	216
2	La Joya ISD	28,788	120	240
3	Harlingen ISD	18,429	75	246
4	Weslaco ISD	17,156	69	249
5	Harlandale ISD	14,381	62	232
6	Victoria ISD	14,303	72	199
7	Edgewood ISD	10,471	55	190
8	Eanes ISD	8,061	40	202
9	Nacogdoches ISD	6,315	31	204
10	KIPP Austin Public Schools	5,167	24	215

Social workers are trained mental health professionals who help strengthen entire school climates and address individual needs by:

- Implementing school-wide programming and training,
- providing prevention, intervention, and crisis management services school-wide and to individuals,
- conducting therapeutic sessions for individuals and groups and connecting students and families with community-based resources, and
- identifying the warning signs of underlying challenges and addressing the social, emotional, cultural, and academic factors that could be impacting an individual's ability to thrive in school.

It is also interesting to note differences between the largest school districts’ prioritization of counselors and mental health professionals. For example, while Houston is the state’s largest school district, the numbers they report to TEA place them behind other large districts in the number of counselors and mental health professionals that they employ. Consequently, Houston has one of the highest student-to-CMHP ratios in the state.

**Counselor + Mental Health Professional to Student Ratio,  
Highest Enrolling School Districts, 2017-18**

Rank	District	Enrollment	Counselors & Mental Health Professionals	Student:CMHP Ratio
1	Houston ISD	214,175	305	702
2	Dallas ISD	156,832	504	311
3	Cypress-Fairbanks ISD	116,401	275	423
4	Northside ISD	106,700	352	303
5	Fort Worth ISD	86,234	295	292
6	Austin ISD	81,650	288	284
7	Katy ISD	77,522	182	426
8	Fort Bend ISD	75,275	237	318
9	Aldine ISD	67,331	212	318
10	North East ISD	66,101	231	286

Licensed Specialists in School Psychology (LSSPs) are trained to provide school-wide and individual supports, with an emphasis on research-based interventions. Their duties include:

- Ensuring the use of evidence-based strategies in “areas such as discipline, instructional support, staff training, school and other agency improvement activities, [and] program evaluation,”
- Enhancing collaborations between schools and families in the school community,
- Addressing the diverse learning and mental health needs of all students in a school, and
- Performing evaluations to determine students’ special education needs.

## RESEARCH SUPPORTS PRIORITIZATION OF COUNSELORS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

### PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

One counselor advocate reported that some school-based counselors are asked to spend between 30% and 60% of their time on tasks that are outside of their required duties. She noted that while everyone in a school must occasionally take on additional responsibilities to help support the campus, counselors are often asked to shoulder more than their fair share, which means they cannot adequately support the needs of students and other adults in the school.

The counselor advocate noted that school administrators would benefit from better training on the Texas Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs (so that they can utilize the skills of school counselors) and more support to access individuals who can perform the test proctoring, scheduling, and other tasks that counselors are often asked to perform.

Counseling and mental health professionals are an important part of ensuring safe and supportive schools for all students. Research shows that lower counselor-to-student ratios are “significantly associated with higher graduation rates and lower disciplinary incidents.”<sup>i</sup> Another study found that the ratio of students-to-counselors in a school was strongly related to student outcomes, with more favorable ratios related to improved attendance rates and academic outcomes, as well as decreased discipline rates.<sup>ii</sup>

In-school counseling and mental health professionals help to support students and educators, support implementation of research-based school-wide behavior and climate strategies, and ensure that schools are not relying on exclusionary discipline or law enforcement to address student needs.

Because counseling and mental health professionals provide school-wide, small group, and individualized services, they are in a unique position to recognize (and help others in the school community to recognize and report) when individuals may be experiencing challenges that need an immediate response or may pose a threat to school safety. This identification and intervention function is an important part of keeping schools safe. These professionals can also help to establish the strong student-to-student and student-to-adult relationships and positive school climate that are key to the success of every person on a campus. As the National Association of School Psychologists notes in their Recommendations for Comprehensive School Safety Policies:<sup>iii</sup>

**“Effective school safety efforts should utilize evidence-based practices** to ensure the well-being of all students [as] well as their physical safety. Reasonable building security measures, such as secure doors, lighted and monitored hallways, and check in-check out systems for visitors, are important. Although there have been calls to increase the presence of armed guards at schools, **the research regarding schools that utilize armed security generally demonstrate non-significant impacts on reducing violence while at the same time result in students feeling less safe. Students’ perception of safety is not a trivial consideration given that simply feeling unsafe impedes learning** and the ability to develop a nurturing, supportive, and welcoming school environment.”

### PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Social workers report that some school district administrators do not prioritize the funding and hiring of school-based social workers because they are unaware of the important services that these professionals could be providing. Clearly defining social work services in statute would help school districts to understand the value of having social workers on their campuses.

## FINDING: TEXAS SCHOOLS HAVE HEAVILY INVESTED IN POLICING & SECURITY



The Texas Education Agency began asking districts to report the number of police and security officers employed by school districts separately from other support staff for the first time in 2017-18.<sup>iv</sup> Reporting now identifies school security personnel in one of two ways: (1) security, which includes Chief of Police, Investigators, and Police Officers, and (2) Safety/Security, which includes auxiliary staff who work in security but are not professional or paraprofessional. TEA data for the two categories combined shows 7,048 police or security staff employed by the districts that reported data.

Importantly, TEA does not track police officers that are contracted by a police department to a school district, *resulting in a vast undercount*. There also appears to be confusion on the part of districts as to how to report this data. For example, Houston ISD – which has one of the largest school district police departments in the state – did not report any police officers to TEA, instead reporting all of their officers as auxiliary staff.

While the federal government also collects policing data through the civil rights data collection (CRDC), our review of that database also revealed inconsistent collection, with some districts reporting data directly to Appleseed or to TEA, but not to the CRDC, and vice versa. Appleseed found 178 Texas districts listed in the federal civil rights data collection (CRDC) that reported having a police presence that did not report data to TEA. Similarly, a review of the membership list of the Texas School District Police Chiefs Association showed another 55 school districts listed as members who did not report data to TEA or the CRDC. Still others have reported data to Appleseed through open records requests, but have not reported to any of these entities. Between all of these sources, Appleseed was able to identify **437 Texas districts that report a police presence**, and another **65 districts that reported auxiliary security staff** to TEA.

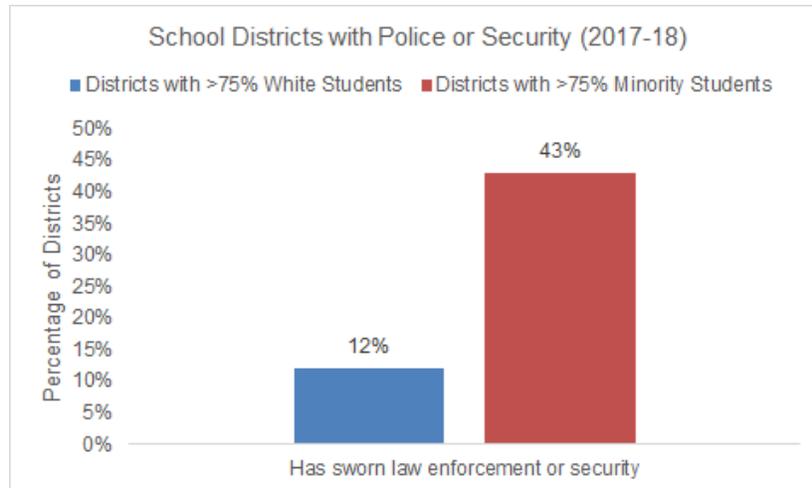
### WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL POLICING IN TEXAS

- In Texas, school districts can create their own police departments, contract with local law enforcement agencies to assign officers to the district, or a combination of the two.
- Though the term “School Resource Officer” (SRO) is often used to describe any school-based police officer, only officers employed by local law enforcement agencies are technically considered SROs.
- All school-based police officers (whether they are SROs or employed by a school district police department) are licensed peace officers, just like the officers that anyone encounters outside of a school building. This means they have all the powers and tools that any other police officer has, including the power to arrest, issue complaints, and use force against students.

### TEA DATA INDICATES MINORITY STUDENTS ARE MORE HEAVILY POLICED

Using only the TEA data, Appleseed looked at the percentage of majority minority districts reporting a police or security presence, versus majority White districts.<sup>v</sup> Our analysis found that there are security or law enforcement officers present in at least 43% of school districts with majority minority students, however, in school districts with majority White students, only 12% have security or law enforcement officers present. Importantly, these analyses likely underestimate the number of law enforcement present in school districts as

it does not account for districts that have contracted out to police departments. Additionally, campus level variations in the number of police officers may make this distinction more prevalent.<sup>vi</sup>



## A FOCUSED REVIEW OF 80 DISTRICTS SHOWS DIFFERENCES IN PRIORITIZATION OF RESOURCES

Due in large part to our concerns that the data collected by TEA might be flawed, Texas Appleseed sent open records requests directly to 80 school districts so that we could look in a more focused way at how districts may be prioritizing resources between support staff, like counselors and mental health professionals, and security staff. Student enrollment in these districts was approximately 2.5 million, **accounting for 47 percent of the student population** statewide.

We analyzed the data to determine the police and security officer to student ratio, and the officer to counselor ratio. Our analysis showed vast differences in the way that schools were prioritizing resources between these two types of staff.

### WHAT IS CONSIDERED AN IDEAL OFFICER TO STUDENT RATIO?

There is no good answer to this question, and most policing experts recommend that rather than relying on a standard ratio, departments should undertake a workload study. Certainly, the workload in a school district should differ significantly from that of *any* municipal police department. In our research, we could not find any information about the ideal ratio for school district police departments. However, according to data reported by the FBI, the median officer to citizen ratio for a city with a population of 100,00 – 200,000 is approximately 14.3 officers per 10,000 citizens, or a roughly 700:1 citizen to officer ratio.

To understand the way Texas cities this size compare to the median, we include 2016 FBI data for a few cities this size from around the state:

<b>Amarillo</b>	584:1	<b>Lubbock</b>	645:1	<b>Plano</b>	826:1
<b>Brownsville</b>	763:1	<b>McKinney</b>	900:1	<b>Richardson</b>	729:1
<b>League City</b>	892:1	<b>Pearland</b>	699:1	<b>Round Rock</b>	757:1

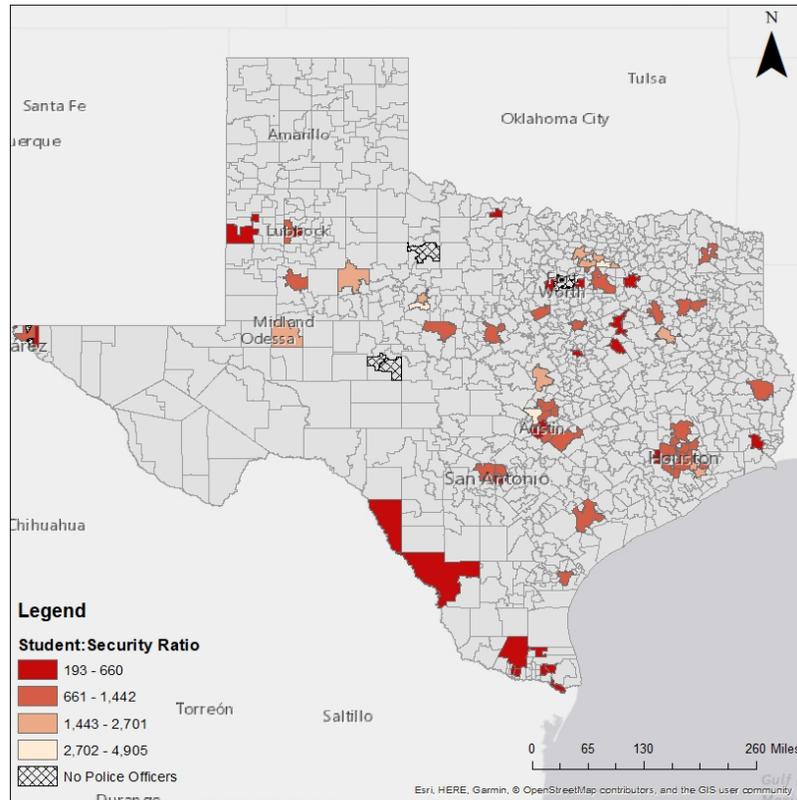
Source: Mike Maciag, *How Many Police Officers Does a City Need*, Governing Magazine, October 20, 2016; Governing Magazine, *Police Employment Officers Per Capita Rates for U.S. Cities*, July 2, 2018, available at <https://www.governing.com/gov-data/safety-justice/police-officers-per-capita-rates-employment-for-city-departments.html>

Our analysis of this data showed that the average student-to-officer ratio was 795:1, close to or better than the ratios of the municipal police departments listed above. A look at the 10 districts (among the 80 we analyzed) with the lowest ratios shows that some have far lower student-to-officer ratios.

Rank	District	Enrollment	Total Officers	Student:Officer
1	United ISD	43,308	224	193:1
2	Laredo ISD	24,069	118	204:1
3	Wichita Falls ISD	14,096	62	227:1
4	Rio Hondo ISD	1,951	8	244:1
5	Anthony ISD	839	3	280:1
6	Raymondville ISD	2,088	7	298:1
7	Edinburg CISD	34,156	113	302:1
8	Brownsville ISD	45,578	146	312:1
9	Whiteface CISD	324	1	324:1
10	Edgewood ISD	10,471	31	338:1

A map of the student-to-officer ratio for all 80 surveyed districts shows variations in staffing.

**Student to Police Officer/Security Ratio: Surveyed Districts (2017-18)**



Sources: Police officer data taken from open records requests to each district. School district shapefile taken from Texas Education Agency Public Open Data website

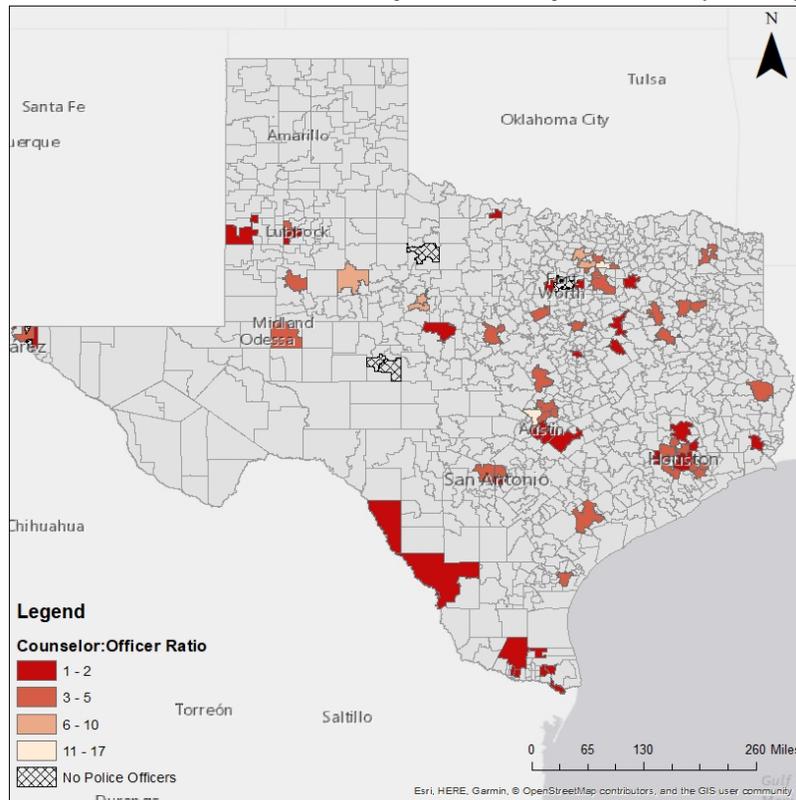
## FINDING: SOME DISTRICTS HAVE MORE OFFICERS THAN COUNSELORS



Our final analysis looked at the way the 80 districts that provided us with data prioritized counseling and mental health professional resources compared to policing and security resources. In some districts, the number of CMHPs far outnumbered the number of police or security officers. In others, the opposite was true. While, on average, these districts employed two counselors for every police or security officer, our analysis revealed dramatic variations in the counselor-to-officer ratio.

Of the districts we sampled, 23 districts had a counselor-to-officer ratio of 4:1 or better. However, on the opposite end of the spectrum, 26 districts had a counselor-to-officer ratio that was lower than 2:1.

**Counselor to Police Officer/Security Ratio: Surveyed Districts (2017-18)**



Sources: Police officer data taken from open records requests to each district. Counselor data taken from open records requests to the Texas Education Agency. School district shapefile taken from Texas Education Agency Public Open Data website

### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE DANGERS OF OVER-RELIANCE ON SCHOOL POLICE?

Texas Appleseed has exhaustively researched and reported the dangers associated with over-policing our schools. Our research, and that of other experts, shows that over-relying on school police comes with a host of risks for students and schools, including:

- Increased risk of poor academic outcomes, including dropout;
- Increased referrals to the juvenile and criminal justice systems for age-appropriate misbehavior;
- Overrepresentation of students of color and those with disabilities in law enforcement interactions, despite research showing that they are no more likely to misbehave than other students; and
- Risk to school climate, with schools that have a higher police presence reporting poorer climate.

The range was surprising, with Plano ISD reporting the highest ratio, at 17 counselors for every police officer, and United ISD showing the lowest ratio, with two officers for every counselor. The surveyed districts with a counselor-to-officer ratio lower than 1:1 were:

District	Enrollment	Total CMHPs	Total Officers	CMHPs:Officers
Edinburg CISD	34,156	108	113	1.0:1
Rio Hondo ISD	1,951	7	8	0.9:1
Beaumont ISD	18,858	45	54	0.8:1
Wichita Falls ISD	14,096	51	62	0.8:1
Laredo ISD	24,069	76	118	0.6:1
United ISD	43,308	112	224	0.5:1

Of the surveyed districts, the differences between the 10 districts with the highest enrollment shows the wide variation between districts.

District	Enrollment	Total CMHPs	Total Officers	CMHPs:Officers
Houston ISD	214,175	305	220	1.4:1
Dallas ISD	156,832	504	169	3.0:1
Cy-Fair ISD	116,401	275	106	2.6:1
Northside ISD	106,700	352	117	3.0:1
Austin ISD	81,650	288	134	2.1:1
Katy ISD	77,522	182	127	1.4:1
Fort Bend ISD	75,275	237	56	4.2:1
Aldine ISD	67,331	212	73	2.9:1
North East ISD	66,101	231	71	3.3:1
Conroe ISD	61,580	166	77	2.2:1

In some districts, the difference in the way they prioritize these resources can also be seen in their budgets, with our analysis of TEA budget data showing that 63 Texas districts (42 of which are charters) spend more per student on security and monitoring than on guidance and counseling. Across these districts, the median spent on security and monitoring was \$51 per student, while the median spent on guidance and counseling was just \$2.

### **WHAT SHOULD THE IDEAL COUNSELOR/MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL-TO-OFFICER RATIO BE?**

While every school district should engage in a workload study for both, the ratios discussed in this report provide guidance for statewide targets.

It is truly hard to imagine that a school district should resource its police department consistent with, or better than, municipalities. Juvenile crime is a small fraction of all crime reported in Texas, and is rarely committed at all by youth under age 13, who comprise close to half of Texas' schoolchildren.

If the ideal counselor-to-student ratio is 250:1, and municipal police departments are staffed at roughly three times that ratio, this suggests a ratio of no lower than 3:1 should be the goal, with larger and better resourced districts using a 4:1 ratio as their target.

## CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There must be a shift in the way that we think about safe and supportive schools. Ensuring safe, supportive schools requires us to consider far more than physical security and monitoring — creating appropriately-secured physical spaces is just a small portion of what must be done to achieve school safety. **Many school districts in Texas continue to increase the amount of money spent on physical security and monitoring each year, despite a lack of reliable research supporting the efficacy of this approach. Simultaneously, important services and programs are under-funded and under-supported and school districts are failing to meet the recommended student-to-professional ratios for a number of key in-school counseling and mental health supports.** This skewed approach compromises the academic, personal, and social success of students and threatens to push young people out of school.

Budgets and funding allocations reflect the values and priorities of the state and school districts—how the pie is divided matters, and speaks volumes about the beliefs and goals of decision-makers. We should not increase funding for physical security and monitoring measures beyond that which is absolutely necessary for effective responses to real safety concerns and emergencies. Consistent with research, the role of school police officers should be limited to responding to safety concerns and emergencies, instead of routine student discipline or administrative duties.

Texas and its school districts should support and prioritize research- and evidence-based approaches and the in-school professionals that help to build positive school climates and provide individualized supports and services to educators, students, and their families. These programs and professionals are currently underfunded and often face a lack of institutional support.

### THE FOLLOWING ARE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL- AND STATE-LEVEL POLICY CHANGES:

- ✓ Ensure that any funds, including grants, given to school districts for "school safety" have clear guidelines and prioritize the use of programs and professionals that have been shown to improve school climates and provide identification, prevention, and intervention services.
- ✓ Enable school districts to meet the recommended student-to-professional ratios for school counselors and social workers, and prioritize funds for these professionals ahead of police and security officers.
- ✓ Expand youth-focused training for school-based police officers.
- ✓ Require and fund training for the use of Behavior Threat Assessment teams.
- ✓ Clearly define the duties of law enforcement so that police officers are not involved in student discipline or counseling.
- ✓ Require data collection about the activities of police in schools.
- ✓ Set a ratio between counselors/mental health professionals and school-based police officers to help school districts prioritize resources.

## REPORT TEAM

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<sup>i</sup> Richard T. Lapan et al, *Missouri Professional School Counselors: Ratios Matter, Especially in High-Poverty Schools*, ASCA Professional School Counseling Journal, Vol. 16, No. 2, available at <http://nyssca.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Lapan-Ratios-Matter-2012.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> J.C. Carey & K.M. Harrington, *The impact of school counseling on student educational outcomes in high schools: What can we learn about effectiveness from statewide evaluations of school counseling practice in Nebrasks and Utah?*, available at <https://www.umass.edu/schoolcounseling/uploads/Research-Brief-8.2.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Nat'l Assoc. of School Psychologists, *NASP Recommendations for Comprehensive School Safety Policies* (January 2013), available at [file:///Users/deborahfowler/Downloads/NASP\\_School\\_Safety\\_Recommendations\\_January%202013.pdf](file:///Users/deborahfowler/Downloads/NASP_School_Safety_Recommendations_January%202013.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Prior to 2017-18, school districts did not report security personnel to TEA in a way that allowed them to be disaggregated or discerned from other non-police or security officer positions.

<sup>v</sup> Note: Districts were categorized as majority minority if their student body population was 75% or more minority ( $n = 342$ ), and as majority White if their student body population was 75% or more White ( $n = 228$ ).

<sup>vi</sup> For other research on the presence of police officers on campuses nationwide, see <https://www.childtrends.org/compared-to-majority-white-schools-majority-black-schools-are-more-likely-to-have-security-staff>.