

# Creating Safe and Supportive Schools

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## FACT SHEET

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A rise in the number of school shootings over time has driven increasing attention to school safety. In 2022, 304 school shooting incidents collectively left 282 individuals wounded or dead, and altogether, there have been [more than 2,000 school shootings](#) in the United States since 1970. While high-profile school shootings have driven intense focus on school safety, the broader picture reveals a more complex reality. Rates of violent incidents within schools have declined by about 20% over the last decade, and while overall rates of victimization within schools are low (approximately 1% of students), students are more likely to report experiencing nonfatal victimization—including theft and assaults—at school than away from school. Exposure to school violence can have long-lasting effects that undermine students’ engagement and mental health. Additionally, addressing these issues through exclusionary discipline has also been [found ineffective](#) and undermining to student attendance, achievement, and attainment.

Although there is widespread agreement that all children and youth deserve a safe and healthy school environment, there is significant debate about how best to promote student safety, despite a substantial body of evidence on the policies and practices that can help make schools safer. As states, districts, and schools consider policies and practices that promote school safety, they can draw on existing research to gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness and potential unintended consequences of proposed strategies.

### Strategies for increasing physical security

While strategies to increase physical security have grown in use over time, their evidence base remains limited.

**Strategy:** Control building access and badge staff and visitors to identify adults with legitimate building access.

**Evidence:** There are no studies of the impact of these measures on school safety.

**Strategy:** Use security cameras to deter crime and capture video evidence of crime that does occur.

**Evidence:** There is no evidence that security cameras improve school safety.

**Strategy:** Install metal detectors for their perceived ability to prevent weapons from being brought into buildings.

**Evidence:** The limited studies conducted have not found metal detectors effective in increasing school safety.

**Strategy:** Employ school resource officers (SROs), who are sworn law-enforcement officers with arrest powers.

**Evidence:** Studies find that SRO presence has [limited effects on school safety](#) and can lead to negative student outcomes, including increased suspensions, expulsions, police referrals, and student arrests. These effects are consistently and significantly [larger for Black students](#) and [students with disabilities](#).

**Strategy:** Arm school staff to protect students from mass shootings.

**Evidence:** There is no evidence that arming staff in K–12 schools would improve school safety. Instead, one school shooting study found that the presence of an armed guard was associated with an [increased number of casualties](#).

### Strategies for building supportive school communities

Substantial research finds that building supportive school communities can protect against school violence.

**Strategy:** Enhance mental health services, including school counselors and other mental health professionals.

**Evidence:** Multiple studies found that counselors can [reduce disciplinary incidents and recidivism](#), [improve teachers’ perceptions of school climate and student behavior](#), and [increase academic achievement](#), particularly for boys.

**Strategy:** Support students’ cognitive, social, emotional, and problem-solving skills.

**Evidence:** A large body of research indicates that [programs that support social and emotional development](#) and

problem-solving skills reduce rates of behavioral problems and emotional distress, increase rates of prosocial behavior, improve relationships with others, and increase students' engagement in learning.

**Strategy:** Utilize [restorative practices](#) to build a strong sense of community, teach interpersonal skills, repair harm after conflict, and proactively meet students' needs, including those resulting from trauma in or outside of school.

**Evidence:** Studies of restorative practices and programs consistently find that they [improve school safety](#), [reduce the use of exclusionary discipline](#), decrease rates of student misbehavior, and improve school climate. A recent large-scale study found that high rates of student exposure to restorative practices were also associated with [increased achievement and reduced mental health challenges](#).

**Strategy:** Design school structures and schedules in ways that support positive relationships, including small learning communities, advisory systems, block scheduling, looping, smaller classes, and school-family connections.

**Evidence:** Multiple studies have found that positive relationships between students and staff throughout the school can help [prevent physical violence and bullying](#). A major national study found that [school connectedness was the strongest protective factor](#) against school absence, substance abuse, and violence among secondary students. Another study found that [positive relationships significantly improve communication](#) about potential threats.

## What can policymakers do?

States and districts can foster safer schools by adopting research-backed strategies, including the following:

**Increase student access to mental health and counseling resources.** Funding can help reduce the student-to-school mental health professional ratios and support external partnerships with community mental health providers.

**Invest in integrated student support systems and community schools.** Adopt and support comprehensive, culturally responsive, multi-tiered systems of support. Community schools, by design, integrate a range of opportunities for students, families, and the community to promote students' physical, social, emotional, and academic well-being.

**Adopt structures and practices that foster strong relationships.** Relationship-centered school designs can be supported by providing time and funding for implementation, as well as by removing impediments to the structures and practices that may exist within traditional staffing allocations, schedules, and collective bargaining agreements.

**Invest in restorative practices and social and emotional development.** Students can learn key skills and develop a sense of responsibility for themselves and their community when zero-tolerance school discipline policies are replaced with policies that explicitly support social and emotional development and the use of restorative practices.

**Incorporate school safety measures and student well-being in state and federal data collection.** School safety data collection could include more detailed information on safety measures, strategies to foster supportive school communities, and educator practices that promote a positive school climate and student well-being.

**Conduct equity reviews of school safety measures and their impact on discipline outcomes.** To identify bias in the implementation of school safety strategies, such as the hiring of SROs, disciplinary action data can be tracked to determine if any strategies are associated with an increased use of exclusionary discipline and police referrals.

**Prepare all school staff to better support student well-being.** Students' social and emotional development can be supported through investments in educators' professional learning and revisions to educator preparation program approval standards, licensure standard competencies, and in-service professional learning and development. States can also establish guidance for the best use of school mental health staff, paraprofessionals, and SROs, as well as criteria for hiring, training, and continuous evaluation of their performance and role.

### Learn more

Access the [Safe Schools, Thriving Students: What We Know About Creating Safe and Supportive Schools](#) report for more in-depth information.

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