

PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

The term “school safety” may invoke visions of officers, security cameras, and metal detectors. Also common are punitive discipline practices, such as those rooted in zero tolerance policies. The intention for implementing these measures is to reduce incidents of violence and improve accountability for youth who perpetrate crimes at school, thereby improving the sense that school is a safe place to be. However, research has now shown that these measures are *not* the keystone of safe schools. In fact, these measures have the opposite of their intended effect, increasing the level of fear experienced by students and expanding the gulf between white students and students of color (Bachman, Randolph, & Brown, 2011; Kupchik & Ellis, 2008; Skiba & Leone, 2001). What is more, these security measures reduce students’ availability for learning. When youth are fearful, they have fewer cognitive resources available for academics—reduced attention and working memory capacity result in a lowered ability to solve complex problems in the learning environment (c.f. Wolf, 2009). What is more, over time these measures set a tone of incivility, distrust, and control that impede students’ ability to bond with school (Bachman et al., 2011).

Instead, students perceive schools as safe when they are supporting and inviting places to build relationships and achieve academic and personal success. Perceptions of safety are built over time, as students interact with peers and adults. Schools are perceived as safe when they are both free from harassment, bullying, violence, and substance use and are rich in positive, supportive relationships and interesting and rigorous opportunities for learning (Hong & Eamon, 2011).

In order to improve the perception that school is a safe place, schools must implement thoughtful, systemic interventions that encourage prosocial behaviors, healthy conflict resolution, and supportive relationships among students and staff. To do so, schools can begin by implementing any of the number of strategies outlined in the following *What Works Briefs: Caring Relationships and High Expectations* (#1), *Opportunities for Meaningful Participation* (#2), *Connectedness* (#4), *Physical and Emotional Violence Perpetration* (#5), *Physical and Emotional Violence Victimization* (#6), *Harassment and Bullying* (#7), and *Substance Use at School* (#8).

What Works Briefs summarize state-of-the-art practices, strategies, and programs for improving school climate. Based on current scholarship in education, school psychology, and other related disciplines, each *What Works Brief* provides a number of practical recommendations for school staff, parents, and community members. *What Works Briefs* can be used separately to target specific issues, or together to address more complex, system-wide issues. All *What Works Briefs* are organized into three sections: Quick Wins: What Teachers & Adults Can Do Right Now; Universal Supports: Schoolwide Policies, Practices, & Programs; and, finally, Targeted Supports: Intensive Supports for At-Risk Youth.

QUICK WINS: WHAT TEACHERS & OTHER ADULTS CAN DO RIGHT NOW

Implement and advocate for clear, consistent, and fair behavior management policies, practices, and programs

- » Be an advocate for clear, consistent, and fair *classroom* rules and expectations.
 - Students must have a voice in the selection of the norms and expectations for themselves and their peers. Have all students in the class sign their names to the agreed-upon rules and expectations as a representation of the classroom community's norms.
 - Rules and expectations should focus on what the student *should do*, rather than what they should not do.
 - Enforce these rules consistently, uniformly, and without negotiation. Any deviation from standardized enforcement of classroom and schoolwide rules and expectations by an adult will communicate preference among students, a process which undermines the sense of community.
 - Avoid threats. Threats are coercive and undermine the climate of the classroom. The need for threats is eliminated when rules, expectations, and related consequences are transparent, fair, and distributed consistently.
- » Be an advocate for clear, consistent, and fair *schoolwide* discipline policies and practices.
 - Involve parents in discipline decisions.
 - Reconsider the use of zero tolerance policies, especially for nonviolent infractions. Begin with a review of your suspension and expulsion data. Look specifically for disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of minority youth. Review CDE's Zero Tolerance brief at: cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/zerotolerance.asp

Be visible, active, and interested

- » Use relationship-building strategies outlined in the following *What Works Briefs: Caring Relationships and High Expectations (#1)*, *Opportunities for Meaningful Participation (#2)*, and *School Connectedness (#4)*.
- » Volunteer to provide a physical presence during typically unstructured (and non-supervised) times, such as during passing periods, lunch breaks, and in parking lots. Advocate for soliciting and training neighborhood volunteers to be present during these times, including parents and grandparents.
- » Volunteer to be an advisor to a "student discipline advisory board", wherein students maintain voice and ownership over classroom and schoolwide rules and expectations. As members of the advisory board, students would be given the opportunity to inform both policies and related disciplinary practices.
- » Notice positive actions taken by students. Provide praise and encouragement for responsible choices, such as informing an adult about a potential threat to school safety.
- » Take special interest in students that appear socially isolated. Build relationships with these students and also refer them to appropriate school-based student support personnel.

UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS: SCHOOLWIDE POLICIES, PRACTICES & PROGRAMS

Universal supports for safe schools target the whole student population, rather than any single at-risk group. Because they generally require more planning across people, programs, or communities, universal

supports for school safety may take longer to implement than “quick wins.” Universal supports that increase students’ perceptions that the school is a safe place include:

Discipline Policies and Practices

- » Establish district- and schoolwide policies and procedures for responding to actual or potential violence.
- » Provide professional development opportunities in crisis prevention and intervention, culturally competent practice, and positive behavior approaches.
- » Reconsider Zero Tolerance Policies (see Quick Wins).
- » Improve collaboration and communication between schools, parents, law enforcement, juvenile justice, and mental health professionals to target both building skills in youth who perpetrate violence (or have threatened to do so), and to build an array of sanctions.
- » Create a continuum of sanctions that have meaningful implications for students, rather than serving to isolate them from the school community. For example, provide restorative opportunities, such as opportunities to provide community service.
- » Increase training for teachers in culturally responsive classroom behavior management and instruction.

Positive, Restorative Discipline Practices

- » Schoolwide Positive Classroom Management Practices
 - Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an organizing framework for helping school personnel organize and deliver evidence-based behavior management practices. While secondary schools face a variety of challenges in implementing PBIS (Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009), reductions in disruptive behavior in middle school samples have been noted (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006). pbis.org
 - Transformative Classroom Management—Based on evidence-based principles of motivation and engagement, Transformative Classroom Management practices help schools increase students’ interest in learning and willingness to follow school and classroom behavioral norms. transformativeclassroom.com
- » Restorative Justice programs are based on the premise that individuals and/or groups in conflict must work together to resolve the problem and repair the resultant damage caused to their relationship. Restorative justice programs applied in school settings focus on the relationship between the perpetrator of the crime (i.e., incident requiring disciplinary strategy) and members of the school community, including potential victims, bystanders, and their families. According to McClusky and colleagues (2008), the practice of restorative justice contributes to school conflict resolution in a variety of ways, including: involvement of all parties in conflict resolution through a fair process; a focus on repairing relationships and trust, rather than on retribution or punishment; and a focus on sharing views and experiences and developing empathy for others in the school community. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recently published a *Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes*. It is available for download at: unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/06-56290_Ebook.pdf

TARGETED SUPPORTS: INTENSIVE SUPPORTS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

Students' perceptions of school safety are influenced by a myriad of factors, including: experiences of bullying and harassment, either as a victim or witness; observation of, or involvement in, substance use on campus; and negative day-to-day interactions with school personnel. In order to improve the perception that school is a safe environment, school personnel must implement thoughtful, systemic interventions that prevent these types of experiences from occur-

ring. To do so, schools can begin by implementing any of the number of targeted support strategies outlined in other What Works Briefs, including: *Caring Relationships and High Expectations* (#1), *Opportunities for Meaningful Participation* (#2), *Connectedness* (#4), *Physical and Emotional Violence Perpetration* (#5), *Physical and Emotional Violence Victimization* (#6), *Harassment and Bullying* (#7), and *Substance Use at School* (#8).

CITATIONS

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