

Investing in Inclusive & Supportive Schools

**A menu of reinvestment
demand options for campaigns
to remove police from schools**

Table of Contents

Introduction

A vision for police-free schools	1
How to use this resource	2

Menu of Investment Demands

	Increase the number of culturally competent and anti-racist guidance counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and school nurses	3
	Implement restorative justice and other approaches to foster supportive learning	6
	Develop a district-wide mental-health continuum	11
	Invest in high-quality afterschool programs	14
	Invest in inclusive school environments	16

Acknowledgements

Much of this tool is updated from a 2017 brief by the Urban Youth Collaborative and the Center for Popular Democracy: [Policy Brief: Young People's Vision for Safe, Supportive, and Inclusive Schools](#). It was adapted by Kate Hamaji with support from Eli Vitulli and Kate Terenzi.

Introduction

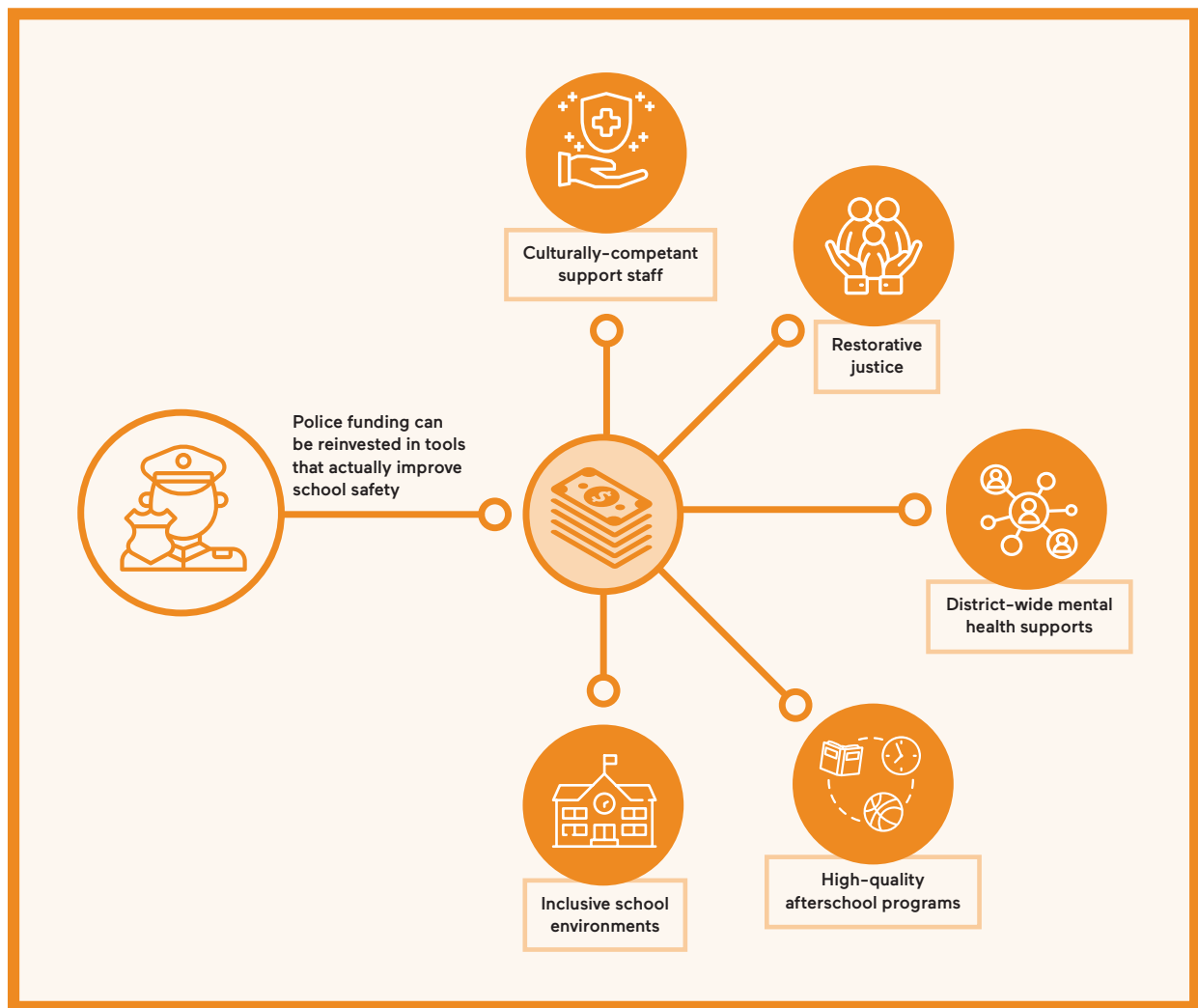
A vision for police-free schools

For more than three decades, Black and Brown young people, parents, educators, and communities have organized to dismantle the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline—one of the most egregious examples of systemic racism and state sanctioned violence in our country. The school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline refers to the policies and practices that punish, isolate, marginalize, and deny access to supportive learning environments for Black, Brown, Latine, Indigenous, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ youth, as well as young people with disabilities, instead funneling them into the criminal legal system. For immigrants and undocumented young people, school push-out can result in detention and deportation.¹

Each year, school districts—aided by states and the federal government—continue to funnel millions of dollars into policing and the criminalization of Black and Brown young people, while underinvesting in the very resources and supports that truly keep them safe. There is no substantial evidence that such practices make schools any safer.² On the other hand, studies show that investments in counselors,³ mental health resources,⁴ and restorative justice⁵ contribute to school safety. In a 2021 national survey of more than 600 young people, respondents overwhelmingly valued more support and resources over school police, including increased funding for teachers, nurses, social workers, and mental health supports.⁶

Young people’s vision for police-free schools is possible, and support for this call is growing. In 2020, rooted in the history of many longstanding campaigns led by young people of color, the country saw unprecedented progress towards police-free schools. As just a few examples, Oakland, California, voted to dismantle its school police department,⁷ and Milwaukee,⁸ Minneapolis,⁹ Portland,¹⁰ and Madison¹¹ ended school district contracts with local police departments. In a 2022 analysis, at least 50 school districts had taken some action towards removing police from schools since 2020.¹² A handful of districts have since reinstated school police.¹³ Communities are now fighting to maintain those advancements, against intense conservative backlash.

Now is the time to remove police and security from all schools, investing instead in support for young people’s education, creativity, and joy.



How to use this resource

This resource presents an overview of programs and resources that contribute to safe and supportive schools, such as mental health supports, restorative practices, after school programming, culturally responsive education, and investments in safety for LGBTQ+ students. As young people, educators, and their families engage in school budget advocacy and call on their districts to divest from school policing, we hope this tool will serve as a resource for formulating demands about how to best redirect those funds.

This document draws from existing resources:

- The context and framing for this tool is taken from [The Youth Mandate for Education and Liberation: A mandate to guide us from crisis to liberation](#)¹⁴ and [Arrested Learning: A survey of youth experiences of police and security at school](#).¹⁵
- Much of the content on investment demands is an update from a 2017 brief by the Urban Youth Collaborative and the Center for Popular Democracy: [Policy Brief: Young People's Vision for Safe, Supportive, and Inclusive Schools](#).¹⁶



Increase the number of culturally competent and anti-racist guidance counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and school nurses.

The Problem

Prior to COVID-19, guidance counselor, social worker, school psychologist, and school nurse positions were already severely underfunded, and their importance has only increased as a result of the pandemic. Despite their impact on young people and overall school safety, these positions are understaffed and underfunded in districts across the country. According to the ACLU, 14 million young people attend “schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.”¹⁷

- **School nurses:** According to 2020 data, a quarter of all US schools have no nurse.¹⁸
- **Guidance counselors:** The American School Counselor Association (ASCA)’s recommended ratio for counselors to students is 1:250,¹⁹ yet the ASCA’s 2021–2022 school year data showed a national average of 408 students for every school counselor.²⁰ According to a 2019 report, over 90 percent of young people attend schools with higher than recommended ratios.²¹ For high needs districts, this ratio should be even lower (1:100 counselor to students).²²
- **Social workers:** According to a 2019 report, not a single state met the recommended 1:250 ratio of social workers to students.²³
- **School psychologists:** The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends a ratio of one school psychologist per 500 students, but the estimated national ratio is currently more than double that (1:1,211), with some states at nearly 1:5,000 school psychologists.²⁴

	Recommended Ratios		Current Reality	
School psychologists	1:500		1:1,211	
Guidance counselors	1:250*		1:408	
School nurses	1:750**		A quarter of US schools have no school nurse as of 2020.	
Social workers	1:250		Not a single state met the recommended ratio as of 2019.	
*for general education students **for a healthy student population				

Impact on School Safety

Counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and school nurses are critical resources for young people, creating supportive learning environments and reducing disruptions to learning at school. They are often the first to see young people who are stressed and in crisis.²⁵ Schools with more mental health providers “see improved attendance rates, lower rates of suspension and other disciplinary incidents, expulsion, improved academic achievement and career preparation, and improved graduation rates.”²⁶ While there is no substantial evidence that police in schools improve school safety,²⁷ data shows that staff who provide health and mental health services to young people in schools “not only improve health outcomes for those students, but also improve school safety.”²⁸

Recommendations

Instead of funding school police, districts should use those dollars to:

- Ensure that all school nurses, guidance counselors, social workers, and school psychologists reflect the school communities they serve and are trained to provide anti-racist, culturally competent care.
- Hire guidance counselors to match the recommended 1:100 student-to-guidance-counselor ratio in high needs districts²⁹ and 1:250 for general education students.³⁰
- Hire social workers to match the recommended 1:250 student to social worker ratio.³¹
- Hire school nurses to meet the following recommended ratios: 1:750 for a healthy student population; 1:225 for student populations requiring daily service; 1:125 for student population with complex needs; and 1:1 for students that require daily, continuous care.³²
- Hire school psychologists to meet the recommended 1:500 ratio.³³



Photo Credit: Make the Road New Jersey



Implement restorative justice and other approaches to foster supportive learning

The Problem

In schools across the country, young people are subject to exclusionary discipline policies (for example, suspensions, expulsions, and arrests) that impact Black, Brown, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ students as well as students with disabilities most severely.³⁴ For example, according to the most recently available national data of k-12 students (2017–2018), Black students were expelled at rates more than twice their share of total enrollment.³⁵ A staggering 65 percent of Black students with disabilities were subject to some form of disciplinary removal.³⁶ These disparities reflect anti-Black and ableist stereotypes that permeate the educational system—that portray Black and certain disabled students as more dangerous and disruptive and less deserving of care than other students—not the realities of student behavior.

Research shows that exclusionary discipline practices can have long-term, negative impacts on young people. For example:

- **Suspensions push young people into incarceration.** Young people who attend schools with high suspension rates are more likely to be arrested or incarcerated as adults. One study showed that young people who attended stricter schools were 17 percent more likely to be arrested and 20 percent more likely to be incarcerated than at less strict schools.³⁷
- **Arrests push young people out of school and into the criminal legal system.** A first-time arrest doubles the odds that a young person will be pushed out of high school (sometimes referred to as “dropping out”).³⁸ A first-time court appearance quadruples the odds.³⁹ Severe discipline—including arrests—predict grade retention, school pushout, and future involvement in the juvenile and criminal legal systems.⁴⁰
- **Police in school creates a culture of hostility for Black and Brown young people, LGBTQ+ young people, and students with disabilities, fueling the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline.** The experiences of

countless Black and Brown young people show that police in schools create hostile environments where they are more likely to be arrested, harassed, and assaulted by the police.⁴¹ LGBTQ+ people (especially trans people), as well as disabled people, experience targeted harassment, discrimination, and violence from police,⁴² making police in schools inherently unsafe for LGBTQ+ and disabled young people. For immigrant young people, an arrest on their records can impact their ability to apply for immigration status, and a conviction can result in them losing their legal status, such as DACA, or being barred from becoming eligible to get immigration status.⁴³

Districts must replace exclusionary practices with restorative justice and other approaches, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and teach Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to support safety and learning.⁴⁴

Impact on school safety

Restorative Practices: Restorative approaches shift school policies toward creating nurturing, inclusive, and supportive schools.⁴⁵ Restorative practices focus on building strong relationships between everyone in the school community, which can help prevent conflict from occurring. In dealing with conflict, restorative practices aim to heal relationships by bringing together everyone impacted by wrongdoing and collectively considering the needs and responsibilities of those involved.⁴⁶ They emphasize holding each other accountable through communal dialogue that promotes inclusivity, constructive engagement, and the restoration of relationships, rather than punishment and exclusion.⁴⁷ A review of nearly 20 years of research on restorative justice in schools suggests that restorative justice positively impacts discipline rates, discipline disparities, and overall school climate.⁴⁸

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS): PBIS is a “multi-tiered school wide intervention model” that supports learning and a positive school climate, limiting the need for exclusionary discipline practices.⁴⁹ PBIS focuses on promoting positive behavior with a three tier approach. Tier one is “universal or primary prevention,” which applies to most students. In tier one, schools outline the positive behaviors they want to prioritize and focus on promoting those schoolwide.⁵⁰ In tier two, which applies to about 15 percent of students who struggle with tier one supports, students receive specialized interventions that seek to uncover the underlying social, emotional, or academic issues that may be causing the behavior.⁵¹ In tier three (typically less than five percent of students), those who do not respond to tier two interventions receive additional support, which might include an individual plan to support a student and additional support from school psychologists and other staff.⁵²

PBIS has been adopted by more than 25,000 schools nationwide.⁵³ Studies have found that “when implemented rigorously, PBIS significantly lowers suspension rates and yields a host of other positive outcomes,”⁵⁴ such as increasing instructional time and encouraging the development of positive teacher-student relationships.⁵⁵

Example

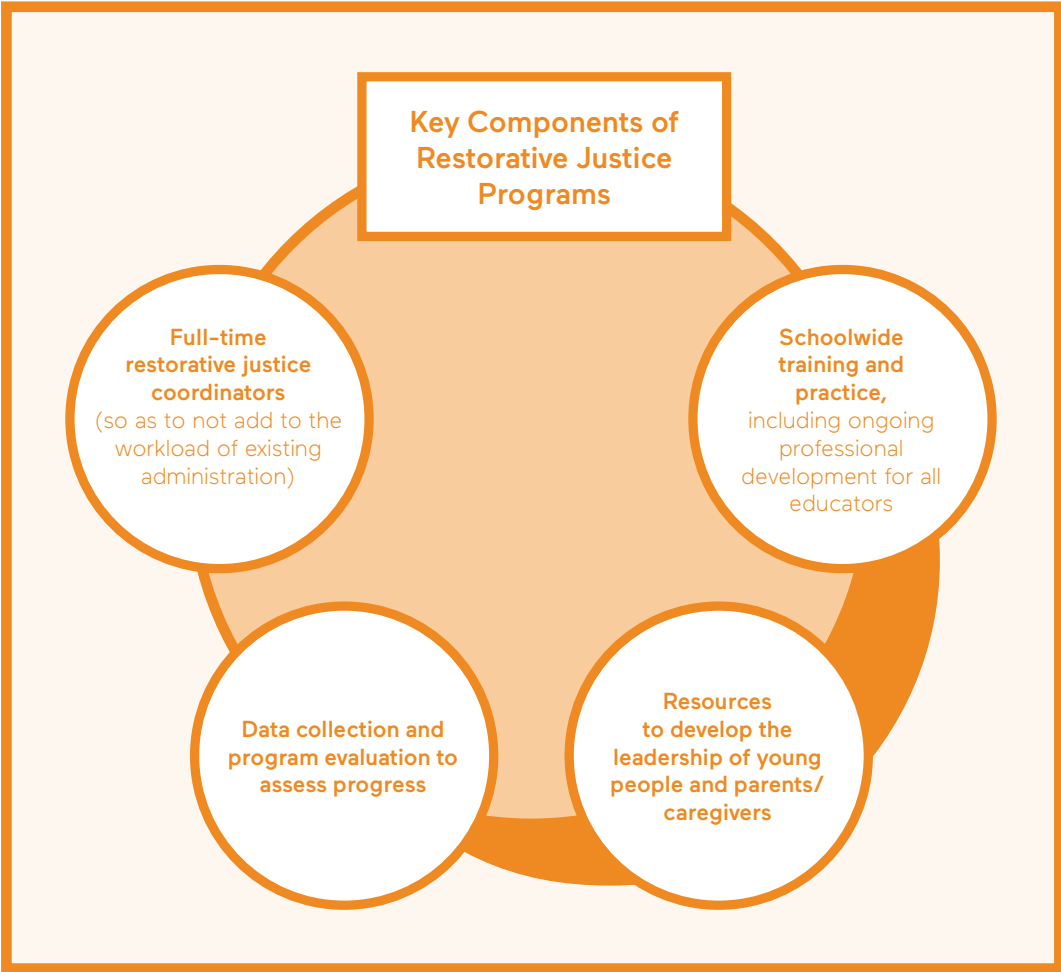
Oakland Unified School District

The **Oakland Unified School District (OUSD)** has a **longstanding school-based restorative justice program** that is often identified as a model program.⁵⁶ Started in 2005 in response to high suspension rates particularly for Black students, the restorative program is a collaboration between OUSD—one of the largest school districts in California with over 34,000 students in district-run schools, over 46 percent of whom are Latine and over 20 percent of whom are Black—and Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth.⁵⁷ The program focuses on the use of multiple types of “circles”—safe spaces where participants build trust, shared values, and accountability—including classroom circles to change school climate, circles to repair harm or address conflict and build relationships, mediation and family group conferences, and welcome/reentry circles for reintegration following experiences in the juvenile justice system.⁵⁸ Thousands of students participate in the program each year, and the program trains teachers, staff, administrators, and students in restorative justice practices.

According to a study of the program, most students, teachers, administrators, and staff view the program as beneficial and improving school climate. For example, nearly all (88 percent) of teachers reported that restorative justice practices were helpful in managing student behavior in classrooms and about half reported that they helped reduce officer referrals, especially for Black students.⁵⁹ **Over three-fourths of staff reported that circles were successful in repairing harm or resolving conflict.**⁶⁰ Students who participated in circles reported “enhanced ability to understand peers, manage emotions, greater empathy, resolve conflict with parents, improve home environment, and maintain positive relationships with peers.”⁶¹ Since the implementation of the program the racial disparities between Black students and white students’ discipline lessened, and the number of Black students suspended for “disruption/willful defiance” (a charge well-documented for driving racist discipline referrals) decreased significantly.⁶² While these declines may not be entirely attributable to the program, the Black/white discipline gap was, on average, lower for students participating in the program than for students that did not.⁶³

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): SEL is “a framework that focuses on the core social and emotional skills necessary for students of all ages to be healthy and successful.”⁶⁴ It bridges “curriculum and teaching with school policies and collaboration with parents and communities.”⁶⁵ SEL creates school spaces that are nurturing and affirming and rooted in equity and deep relationships.⁶⁶

SEL programs support young people in five key areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.⁶⁷ In elementary school, SEL often focuses on key development skills, such as the ability to express emotions and manage peer relationships with less adult support; while in middle and high school, it often focuses on young peoples’ identities and attitudes towards themselves and others.⁶⁸ SEL can be taught through standalone curricula or integrated into other subject areas.⁶⁹ Importantly, it can be used to guide conversations about identity through an anti-racist and anti-oppressive lens.⁷⁰ Research shows that “students exposed to effective SEL instruction improve on key social and emotional skills and attitudes, and achieve better grades and more long-term success than youth who do not receive this instruction.”⁷¹



Recommendations

Instead of funding school police, districts should use those dollars to fund robust restorative justice programs, PBIS, and SEL. Schools should:

- Fully fund restorative justice programs, including funding for:
 - Full-time restorative justice coordinators (so as to not add to the workload of existing administration)⁷²
 - Schoolwide training and practice, including ongoing professional development for all educators⁷³
 - Resources to develop the leadership of young people and parents/ caregivers
 - Data collection and program evaluation to assess progress
- Fully implement PBIS and SEL and shift curriculum to support these approaches



Develop a district-wide mental-health continuum

The Problem

In schools across the country, police are called to respond to mental health crises, causing harm to young people who are in need of mental health support.⁷⁴ Young people and educators report that Black and Brown young people are disproportionately represented in police responses to what they perceive as mental health emergencies. For example, in New York City schools in 2022, 85 percent of police responses to perceived mental health crises involved Black or Latine students, who comprise approximately 66 percent of the student population.⁷⁵ In New York City, police restrain Black children as young as four years old when they experience mental health crises.⁷⁶

The pandemic has only exacerbated the need for mental health support for young people. Research shows that, compared to pre-pandemic times, young people are more likely to visit the emergency room due to a mental health issue.⁷⁷ In early 2021, nearly half of all parents in a national survey reported that their children had developed new or worsening mental health conditions since the start of the pandemic.⁷⁸

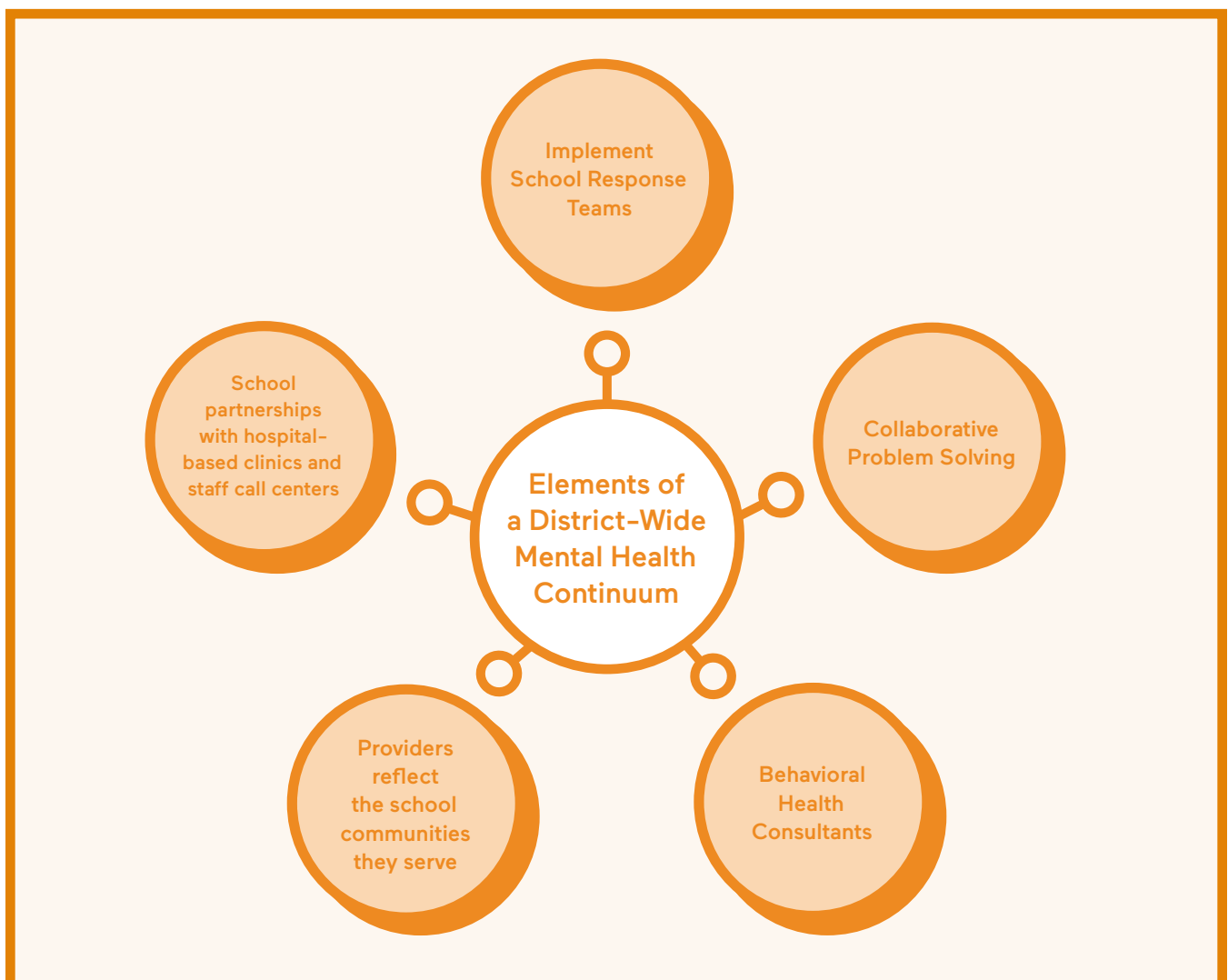
Impact on School Safety

School-based mental health supports are critical to creating safe schools—not because young people are dangerous but because these school-based resources foster supportive learning environments. Schools are the ideal place to deepen investment in mental health support, as young people access mental health care in schools more commonly than other settings, including through primary care.⁷⁹ Studies show that school-based mental health services are effective at addressing mental health challenges while improving feelings of safety for young people.



For example:

- A meta-analysis of the impact of school mental health interventions found that 62.5 percent of the interventions studied demonstrated positive mental health and educational outcomes.⁸⁰
- A review of 43 studies concluded that school-based services are effective at addressing mental health challenges for elementary-aged children.⁸¹
- Several studies suggest that school-based mental health services can reduce school absences and suspensions, both of which are associated with school push out.⁸²
- Young people themselves point to mental health support as a better investment priority than police. In a 2021 national survey of more than 600 young people, **93 percent** of respondents indicated that they would like to see more or better quality mental health supports at their schools.⁸³



Recommendations

Instead of funding school police, districts should invest in a network of mental health services to support students along a spectrum of mental health needs. The network should provide the resources and infrastructure necessary to bring intensive support services to students within schools.⁸⁴ Specifically, districts should:

- Develop a continuum of services to connect in-school programs to more intensive external services. For example, develop school partnerships with hospital-based clinics and staff call centers with experienced mental health clinicians to field calls from schools. These clinicians can help school staff evaluate what constitutes a crisis and reduce the overuse of emergency rooms.⁸⁵
- Implement School Response Teams to work with young people and support school officials in better responding to mental health needs. These response teams must never include police.⁸⁶
- Hire full-time Behavioral Health Consultants and work with community-based organizations to collect data and evaluate the effectiveness of the continuum.⁸⁷
- Train school staff in Collaborative Problem Solving,⁸⁸ which uses a structured problem solving process to help young people build neurocognitive skills and operationalizes principles of trauma-informed care.⁸⁹
- Ensure that providers reflect the school communities they serve and are trained to deliver culturally competent care.

Invest in high quality afterschool programs

The Problem

High quality afterschool programs can improve young people's educational outcomes and social emotional learning, while offering a safe space for young people after school hours.⁹⁰ Although most afterschool programs are now physically open again, they are still recovering from the impacts of the pandemic. In a 2022 survey, nearly a quarter of programs had not been able to return to their regular operational capacity and cited challenges that include hiring and retaining staff and increased costs of operating due to inflation.⁹¹ In 2020, there were nearly 25 million young people who were not able to access afterschool programs, with low-income families and Black and Latine families facing the greatest barriers.⁹² With increased costs and operating challenges since 2020, it is likely that even fewer students can access afterschool programs.

Impact on School Safety

Research shows that afterschool programs can “improve educational and employment outcomes”⁹³ while increasing safety by creating a safe space for young people to spend their time and avoid interactions with police. Consistent participation in afterschool programs has lowered pushout rates and helped close opportunity gaps for low-income students.⁹⁴ In addition, afterschool programs “report providing their students with academic supports, opportunities to connect with their peers, and time to build foundational skills, such as communication and critical thinking skills.”⁹⁵ Parents value afterschool programs because they offer safe environments for their children, particularly when parents are at work and unable to be present.⁹⁶ In a nationally representative 2022 survey of parents on afterschool programs, 80 percent of respondents said that a “safe environment” was an “extremely important” factor to them.⁹⁷





Photo Credit: Make the Road New Jersey

Recommendations

Instead of funding school police, districts should redirect those dollars to support high quality afterschool programming. Afterschool programs are funded by a variety of sources, including public funding (federal, state, and local funds), private funding (grants and donations), parent fees, and in-kind contributions.⁹⁸ School districts should:

- When applicable, support afterschool programs with general fund dollars though the school district budget.
- When applicable, engage in budget advocacy at the city level to direct general fund dollars to afterschool programs. (These funds could be funneled through department budgets, such as departments of education, health, human and social services, youth development, and parks and recreation.)⁹⁹
- Advocate for new opportunities for local funding. For example, in Seattle, the Families, Education, Preschool, and Promise (FEPP) Levy is a seven-year, \$619 million-dollar levy that voters approved in 2018 that, among many other things, supports afterschool programming.¹⁰⁰

Invest in inclusive school environments



The Problem

In recent years, a renewed wave of right wing political activity at the state and local levels has directly impacted young peoples' experiences and feelings of safety at school. In particular, unprecedented attacks against LGBTQ+ people threaten the mental health and physical safety of LGBTQ+ students and attempt to deny their right to exist at school. These efforts include "making it illegal to talk about LGBTQ people or issues or to support LGBTQ students, pulling all LGBTQ content from school libraries and books, banning transgender students from playing sports with their friends or using the restroom at school that matches their gender identity, and more."¹⁰¹ As of July 2023, the ACLU has tracked 228 bills attacking LGBTQ+ rights in state legislatures.¹⁰² In a 2023 poll, 86 percent of transgender and nonbinary young people said that "recent debates about anti-transgender bills have negatively impacted their mental health."¹⁰³

In addition to attacks on LGBTQ+ people, at the local level, far-right organizations have identified school boards as essential to winning other oppressive ideological battles over critical Race Theory (CRT) and, thus, how race is understood and discussed in this country. For example, across the country in 2021, there were candidates in 76 school districts who highlighted race in education, or CRT, and many won.¹⁰⁴ When young people are unable to discuss racism and identity at school or have their communities' histories taught in a truthful way, they are denied the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and learn about others,¹⁰⁵ which are critical features of inclusive schools.



Impact on School Safety

Safe schools require inclusive school cultures. Schools that erase Black and Brown history are inherently exclusive. When LGBTQ+ students' very existence is under attack, they are not safe at school. For trans and gender nonconforming youth in particular, school is sometimes the only place it is safe to live as who they are, and it is thus essential to their mental health and wellbeing that their identities are respected at school. Trans students in particular experience high rates of parental rejection and suicide,¹⁰⁶ making safety at school and an affirming school culture critically important. Any police presence in schools is unsafe for LGBTQ+ young people, who experience targeted harassment, discrimination, and violence from police.¹⁰⁷

Research suggests that when young people discuss issues of identity and race, they benefit. For example, one study of an ethnic studies course in the San Francisco school district increased ninth graders' attendance, course completion rates, and grades, compared to similar students that did not participate in the class.¹⁰⁸ Another study looked at an Oakland class for Black boys which focused on Black history and culture that reduced pushout rates from 8.5 percent to 4.9 percent.¹⁰⁹ Research shows that LGBTQ+ students who attend schools with curriculum that includes LGBTQ+ people and history "experience a better school climate and improved academic outcomes."¹¹⁰

Recommendations

Instead of investing in school police, districts should redirect funds toward the following:

- Training for staff on Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) and affirming curriculum. CRE is a method of student-centered education that “cultivates critical thinking instead of just test-taking skills; relates academic study to contemporary issues and students’ experiences; fosters positive academic, racial, and cultural identities; develops students’ ability to connect across cultures; and empowers students as agents of social change.”¹¹¹
- Passing school policies and developing training for staff on the following:
 - Anti-harassment, anti-bullying, and non-discrimination that specifically protect LGBTQ+ students and individuals, and does not rely on police
 - Access to bathrooms, locker rooms, and changing facilities in alignment with trans, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students’ gender identity and/or access to private/individual rooms
 - “Policies affirming trans and gender non-conforming students’ participation in athletics”¹¹²
 - Policies requiring students and staff to use the name and pronouns trans and gender nonconforming young people want to be referred to as. Staff should not be required or even allowed to tell students’ parents about their trans or gender nonconforming identities.¹¹³

Endnotes

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