



Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline

Scarlet Neath
Policy Director, CPE



Center For
POLICING EQUITY

Why Equitable Responses to School Safety Matter

- There is little evidence that police make schools safe
- Stationing police in schools increases disciplinary actions and fuels the school-to-prison pipeline, which disproportionately harms disabled students and students who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and/or LGBTQ+
- Public health strategies, such as school diversion measures and restorative justice initiatives in response to misbehavior, can foster young people's development and contribute to a welcoming school climate
- School climate—which includes a sense of belonging and connectedness—is closely related to behavioral issues and violence at schools

A classroom setting with a whiteboard, colorful decorations, and blue chairs at desks. The whiteboard is decorated with colorful balloons and a calendar. The wall is covered with various educational posters and charts. The foreground shows a desk with blue chairs and a tray of markers.

**Who is affected by
punishment in schools?**

School police drive arrests

- Increased police presence in schools leads to higher rates of referral to law enforcement and more arrests for “disorderly conduct”
- Schools with designated law enforcement officers arrest students at 3.5 times the rate of schools without
 - Police officers arrest Black students 2.8x as often as White students
 - Police officers arrest disabled students 3.3x as often as students without disabilities

School police drive exclusionary discipline

- It also leads to more expulsions and out of school suspension
 - One study of 2.5 million students found that federal grants for police in middle schools increased discipline rates by 6% per year, mostly due to low-level violations

These punishments have long term consequences

- Black children who experience police contact by the 8th grade have 11x greater odds of being arrested by age 20 than their White counterparts

School policing is not experienced equitably

- School policing programs originated as a response to desegregation and Black migration in urban school districts in the 1950s and 1960s
- What police spend their time on today is likely shaped by which students attend the school where they are stationed.
 - SROs in a largely White suburban school district saw their role as protecting students from external threats
 - SROs in an urban district with a larger share of Black students perceived the threat as coming from the students themselves

A classroom setting with a whiteboard, colorful decorations, and a desk with blue chairs. A large teal text box is overlaid in the center.

How can school administrators limit contact with the police?

Implement policies on when to contact police

- Policies should state that police should not be called to manage student misbehavior, unless:
 - There is an immediate threat of serious physical violence
 - The student purposely inflicts injury that requires emergency medical attention

Implement policies on when to contact police

- School policies should state that calling the police is a last resort, and require that any time police are called in to resolve a situation staff cannot handle, school staff must:
 - Get approval from the principal before reporting a student to law enforcement
 - Immediately document, in writing, why the police response was necessary

Implement policies on when to contact police

- To comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, policies should also state that police should not be called to manage behavior that stems from:
 - a student's cognitive disability, mental health condition, or other condition that affects their judgment and behavior (for example, the student has a diagnosis of illness that could affect their judgment and behavior, such as PTSD, epilepsy, or diabetes, or the student appears to be experiencing a mental health emergency)

Implement policies on when to contact police

- Policies should list also certain misbehaviors that **NEVER** warrant a police response, such as:
 - Dress-code violations, cell phone use violations, and any other school disciplinary violations that are not criminal offenses
 - Fighting or hitting that does not result in injury requiring medical attention
 - Forgery, graffiti, or vandalism
 - Insubordination/defiance
 - Loitering
 - Losing or damaging school property
 - Loud or disruptive behavior
 - Mutually voluntary sexual behavior among peers close in age

Implement policies on when to contact police

- Policies should list also certain misbehaviors that **NEVER** warrant a police response, such as:
 - Name-calling, slurs, bullying, and other verbal harassment that do not present any risk of serious physical harm
 - Taking property that belongs to other students, staff, or the school
 - Threats of harm which, in context, are clearly metaphorical (such as “He told you what? I’m gonna kill him!”)
 - Trespassing
 - Truancy or tardiness
 - Use or possession of controlled substances or alcohol

Example of reform: Arlington, VA

- The school board and the Arlington County Police Department released a new memorandum of understanding stipulating that:
 - the department will not be present on campuses unless requested
 - schools will handle all code of conduct violations without involving the police unless required by statute

Example of reform: Oakland, CA

- The city council approved a plan to limit the circumstances in which police could be called to schools and retrain unsworn school security officers
- The Black Organizing Project asked teachers to sign a pledge not to call police for student disciplinary issues
- From August 2021 through April 2022 (a period that included some virtual or hybrid learning) OUSD schools made 93% fewer calls to the police than in the same time frame in 2019–2020

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How can school administrators prevent misbehavior and violence?

A public health approach to school safety

- Alternative public health approaches can equip school staff with appropriate resources to prevent disruptive behavior and meet students' individual needs
- These approaches focus on developing their social-emotional skills, ensuring adequate mental health supports, and fostering a community of connectedness and belonging at school
- New approaches must be supported by robust teacher training and data collection

Example: School Based Diversion Initiative in CT

- Aims to shift the response to student behavioral health crises from punishment to supportive school- and community-based services, including mobile crisis responses
- From 2010 to 2019, on average, participating schools reduced referrals to courts by 29% and increased referrals to mobile crisis services by 55%

Example: Restorative Justice in Denver

- Restorative justice is a non-punitive approach to improving student behavior and school climate with three core principles: repair harm, involve stakeholders, and transform community relationships
- Implemented in DPS at the school and district level, along with reformed discipline policies, and experienced:
 - a decrease in the school system's overall suspension rate from 10.6% in 2006 to 5.6% in 2013
 - the largest reduction in suspension rates (7.2%) occurred for Black students

Example: SEL & trauma-informed learning in SF

- Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a trauma-informed approach based on the understanding that all children need to be taught social and emotional skills, and that children impacted by trauma and chronic stress need the most support in this skill development
- The Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS) program in San Francisco found:
 - improvements in students' ability to learn and in attendance
 - a 32% decrease in total disciplinary referrals
 - a 43% decrease in incidents involving physical aggression after one year, with greater reductions in subsequent years

A photograph of a classroom. On the left, there is a whiteboard on a stand with several colored pushpins. Below it, a desk is cluttered with various school supplies, including a red pencil holder filled with pencils and a yellow container. In the background, there are more desks and blue chairs. On the right side of the image, a window with a blue blind is visible, and several papers are pinned to the wall next to it.

THANK YOU

Find all our school safety resources online at:
policingequity.org/school-safety

sneath@policingequity.org