



## Creating Safe School Environments in Colorado

Policymakers, educators and advocates have identified a need to increase school safety following several high-profile incidents of violence in U.S. schools. The Colorado Children's Campaign compiled existing research on strategies to create safer school environments that are supported by strong evidence.

### What do we know about the safety of school environments in general?

- **The scope of school violence is broad, and overall, schools are safer than we might think.** National statistics demonstrate that school violence has decreased overall since the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> The term “school violence” encompasses many types of violence including student victimization, violent deaths, bullying and weapons carrying, among others. Over the last three decades, U.S. public schools have seen significant decreases in the student victimization rate (instances of theft, violence or serious violence), the shares of students reporting being threatened with a weapon or reporting carrying a weapon at school, and the percentage of students reporting being in physical fights. The percentage of schools reporting incidents of crime occurring has also decreased each year, and data continue to show that the vast majority of homicides or suicides of school-age youth occur away from school.<sup>2</sup> **Despite these improvements, violence is still present in our public schools and can be very harmful to a student's environment.**
- **We know very little about school shooting events and how to stop them, though these events cause significant fear among children and parents.** More than half of American teens worry about a shooting happening in their school, as do a significant portion of U.S. parents.<sup>3,4</sup> While school shooting events are tragic and horrific, their prevalence on a population level is still very rare, making them difficult for researchers to study.
- **Certain experiences and exposures can make a young person more or less likely to engage in violent behavior.** A large body of research exists on the risk and protective factors associated with youth violence in schools, both at the individual and social levels.<sup>5</sup> Individually, students who experience **high emotional stress, low academic performance, being a bully or the victim of bullying, exposure to violence and anti-social attitudes** are at higher risk for violence; experiences that protect against violence and offset the impacts of violence risk factors include **positive social orientation and high educational aspirations**. At the peer level, **low commitment to school, social rejection and a lack of involvement in activities** are risk factors for violence; protective factors include **exposure to positive school climates and close relationships with peers**.

### Which prevention strategies are effective in reducing school violence?

- **School violence prevention strategies that aim to mitigate violence risk factors and/or strengthen protective factors among students have shown promising results and require long-term investments.** The following prevention strategies are supported by research findings and align with expert recommendations from the Colorado School Safety Resource Center, the American Public Health Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation; these strategies are likely to have the strongest impacts and positively affect an entire student population of a school when used together.



Prevention Strategy	What does the research say?
<b>In-school mental health services and behavioral interventions</b>	Research summaries and literature reviews from the last two decades have found that in-school mental health services and behavioral interventions (on the part of school counselors, psychologists, social workers and nurses, but also parents and other services in the community) can effectively respond to a variety of emotional and behavioral issues. <sup>6,7,8</sup> Specifically, intervention programs focusing on aggression have been shown to significantly decrease aggressive behaviors among students. <sup>9</sup>
<b>Positive school climate</b>	The school environment can play a significant role in setting the stage for safety. <sup>10</sup> Three national studies have demonstrated that schools with students who report feeling more connected to their school tend to have less disorder and violence. <sup>11,12,13</sup>
<b>Positive behavioral interventions and supports</b>	Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a school-wide curriculum that explicitly teaches behavioral expectations to students. <sup>14</sup> In schools where the PBIS curriculum has been implemented, two studies found reductions in suspensions, discipline referrals, and bullying among students as reported by teachers. <sup>15,16</sup>
<b>Threat assessment process</b>	The Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines is a school discipline model that recognizes student conflict early with the aim of de-escalation. <sup>17</sup> One study found that students at schools using the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines reported less bullying and more positive perceptions of school climate. <sup>18</sup> When examining students who made violent threats, those attending schools using this Virginia model were more likely to receive counseling and parent conferences. <sup>19</sup>

**Are school resource officers (armed police in schools or “SROs”) and physical security measures such as metal detectors effective in reducing school violence?**

- **Research on the effectiveness of SROs in schools is limited; it finds mixed results as to whether SROs are associated with decreased school violence.**<sup>20</sup> Importantly, the majority of research on this intervention does not address school shootings. Some research has shown that an increased presence of SROs is associated with an increase in school-based arrests for minor misbehaviors, escalating matters of school discipline to matters for the criminal justice system.<sup>21</sup>
- **Research on the effectiveness of physical security measures in schools is extremely limited.**<sup>22</sup> There is no high-quality evidence on the impacts of the following interventions intended to address school violence: video cameras, entry control equipment, identification technology, communication technology and anonymous tip lines.<sup>23</sup> The few investigations into metal detectors find that they may discourage weapons carrying but have no clear effect on reducing violence.<sup>24,25,26</sup>

**What do we know about school safety and recent investments in school safety in Colorado?**

- **Colorado schools are already implementing some of these violence prevention strategies, but measures of implementation and effectiveness are still unclear.** Between 2009 and 2014, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) trained 1,000 state schools in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).<sup>27</sup> Today, many school districts conduct their own threat assessment processes.<sup>28</sup> The state needs to collect data on how these violence prevention strategies are being implemented and whether they are



demonstrating effectiveness, especially with regard to threat assessment processes. An inventory of practices schools employ and their effectiveness would allow for more evidence-based policymaking in future years.

- **In the last few years the Colorado legislature has invested in several measures to improve school safety.** In the 2018 session, the budget was amended to address school safety with an additional \$35 million in one-time funding. The funds were directed “to local school districts, BOCES, and public schools including charter schools to use for capital construction; assistance for physical security; communication improvements; the training of school personnel and school resource officers; and/or coordination with emergency response teams.” Critical bills addressing school safety that passed in the 2019 legislative session include **HB19-1120** (Youth Mental Health Education and Suicide Prevention), **HB19-1017** (Kindergarten Through Fifth Grade Social And Emotional Health Act) and **SB19-010** (Professional Behavioral Health Services For Schools), all of which made investments in the mental and behavioral health of Colorado children.
- **There are some federal opportunities available.** CDE received a five-year School Climate Transformation Grant from the U.S. Department of Education to support the development of an integrated multi-tiered behavioral framework at the state, district and school level. Driven by the local needs of up to four local education providers, the Colorado School Climate Grant will meaningfully integrate and sustainably implement evidence-based climate improvement strategies, including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), dropout prevention as related to suicide prevention, behavioral health, substance abuse prevention, and trauma informed practices to effectively address several early warning indicators. The anticipated funding level is approximately \$200,000 for the 2018-19 school year and \$300,000 for the remaining four years of the grant.<sup>29</sup>

### Best Practices

A joint statement including best practices and policy considerations for supporting school safety was published in 2015 by a coalition of education associations. *A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools* was coauthored by the National Association of School Resource Officers, the American School Counselor Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, the School Social Work Association of America, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.<sup>30</sup> Recommendations from the report include:

1. Allow for **blended, flexible use of funding** streams in education and mental health services;
2. **Improve staffing ratios** to allow for the delivery of a full range of services and effective school–community partnerships;
3. **Develop evidence-based standards** for district-level policies to promote **effective school discipline and positive behavior**;
4. Fund continuous and sustainable crisis and **emergency preparedness, response, and recovery planning** and training that uses evidence-based models;
5. Provide incentives for **intra- and interagency collaboration**; and
6. Use **multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)**. Colorado defines MTSS as “a prevention-based framework of team-driven, data-based problem solving for improving the outcomes of every student...through a layered continuum of evidence-based practices.”<sup>31</sup>



- <sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). Indicators of school crime and safety: 2018. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2019047>
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Graf, N. (2018). A majority of US teens fear a shooting could happen at their school, and most parents share their concern. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/18/a-majority-of-u-s-teens-fear-a-shooting-could-happen-at-their-school-and-most-parents-share-their-concern/>
- <sup>4</sup> Children's Defense Fund. (September 2018). School shootings spark everyday worries: children and parents call for safe schools and neighborhoods. Retrieved from: <https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/YouGov-SafeSchools-Final-Sep-18-2018.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> The Centers for Disease Control. (2017). School violence: risk and protective factors. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/risk.html>
- <sup>6</sup> Rones, M. & Hoagwood, K. (2000). School-based mental health services: a research review. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 3(4):223-41.
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- <sup>24</sup> The Centers for Disease Control. Violence-related attitudes and behaviors of high school students -- New York City, 1992. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 42(40): 773-777.
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