Alternatives to Police in Schools:
Building Positive and Inclusive School Climates

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Responses to student behavior have increasingly incorporated the use of School Resource Officers (SRO) and other law enforcement personnel in schools. This is the case in Maryland where the Maryland Safe to Learn Act (MD. Code Ann., Educ. § 7-1508) requires local school systems to identify either an assigned SRO or other law enforcement coverage for each school. This is concerning since the presence of law enforcement in the schools could increase rates of exclusionary discipline, over-criminalize student behavior, and fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. In addition, while there is a perception that having police officers in schools provides safety, there is no evidence supporting this idea and it may in fact harm the school climate.

Given these concerns, there is a need to reduce the use of police in schools. This requires a shift from school disciplinary approaches that focus on disciplinary consequences (i.e., administering the right punishment for particular conduct) to those that focus on prevention, problem-solving, and rehabilitation. This means intentionally building and sustaining an environment that responds to the needs of every student. Rather than one program, it includes a range of measures and strategies that focus on building relationships and inclusive school climates and adopting interventions that provide mental health and wellness support. Shifting from punishment to a preventive approach works. Adopting disciplinary alternatives that are restorative and rehabilitative have been found to improve school climate, reduce disruptive behavior, and improve student outcomes. These evidenced-based alternatives are described below.

Building Positive and Inclusive School Climates

Restorative Approaches

Restorative approaches incorporate a broad range of programs and strategies that accomplish the goal of creating and sustaining positive learning environments and a preventative and rehabilitative or learning approach to discipline.¹ Restorative approaches prioritize relational pedagogies, justice and equity, foster resilience and well-being and are guided by values

¹ We use the term “restorative approaches” to capture other commonly used terms such as restorative justice, restorative practices, and restorative justice in education.
oriented around dignity, respect, accountability and fairness. They are both proactive in that they nurture problem solving approaches to discipline and cultivate healthy relationships, and responsive in that they attend to the social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs of students. They rely on the importance of the group, or whole, to develop and practice agreed upon norms and rules. Restorative approaches:

“aim to address challenging behaviors and to nurture school climates that promote learning through relational and supportive practices, rather than punitive and exclusionary ones. That is, practitioners ... aim to proactively address relational, emotional, academic, cognitive, and physical needs before challenging behaviors occur. When challenging behaviors do occur, they work to address those behaviors in ways that heal, teach, repair harm, and attend to the needs of both those harmed and those who caused the harm.”

Schools are turning to restorative approaches and moving away from traditional discipline approaches, such as SROs for several reasons. There is growing awareness of the negative impact that SROs and exclusionary discipline policies have on students and schools. Schools with SROs have higher arrest rates than other schools, but with no corresponding impact on school safety. In fact, the presence of police officers in schools helps to redefine disciplinary situations as criminal justice problems rather than social, psychological or academic problems. Police in schools increases exclusionary responses to school discipline incidents, thereby contributing to the criminalization of school discipline. There are also inequities. Consistently, some students—Black students, students with disabilities, and students from other marginalized groups—are more likely to be negatively impacted by interaction with school police or to be suspended or expelled and punished more harshly than their peers. The use of

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exclusionary discipline has been linked to both short- and long-term negative outcomes, including lower academic performance at the school and student level, higher dropout rates, and lower graduation rates. Restorative approaches offer an alternative to the use of SROs and traditional school sanctions while retaining the ability to hold students accountable for their behavior and at the same time, address the causes of misbehavior.

Evidence suggests that restorative approaches reduce suspensions and show promise for narrowing racial disparities, improving the school climate and interactions among students. Nonetheless, mixed findings on some outcomes suggests that the way restorative approaches are implemented can undermine the potential for achieving positive change. This suggests that schools need to take a comprehensive approach that encompasses student behavior as well as staff behaviors, and develop policies and procedures, curricular, pedagogical and other decision-making processes that are schoolwide. Implementation plans should be sensitive to the particular needs of a school and emphasize long-term implementation, sustainability, and professional support. Restorative approaches are also most effective when they target relationships within schools and between schools and communities. Relationship building improves the school’s climate by increasing awareness of students’ lives and building trust among members of the school community.

States and districts can support implementation of restorative approaches by providing needed resources and adopting policies that support restorative approaches. These include:

- **Funding restorative approaches:** Considerable time and resources are needed to build and sustain a restorative approach. Often, funding is provided for a year or two, which is insufficient to develop, implement, monitor, and sustain restorative approaches over time.

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• **Sustainability:** Sustainability requires a commitment to the long-term. One way to sustain restorative approaches is to integrate these practices across the school and district rather than to adopt them as an add-on program. Another is to incorporate restorative approaches into a district’s formal policy and procedures.

• **Staff training and professional development:** Providing training and professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators and staff helps them understand specific restorative techniques and the reasoning behind a restorative approach. To facilitate long-term implementation and sustainability requires opportunities for ongoing professional development.

• **Evaluation:** Invest in long-term, mixed-method research and evaluation over a minimum of three to five years.

Restorative approaches are compatible with and often encompass various other tools, programs, and interventions to achieve the aim of creating positive learning environments and a preventative and rehabilitative or learning approach to discipline. These are summarized below.

**Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)**

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a tiered framework that targets interventions and support based on student need. The Maryland State Board of Education adopted PBIS to (a) build capacity among school staff to adopt and sustain the use of positive, effective practices to create learning environments where teachers can teach and students can learn; and (b) improve the link between research validated practices and the environments in which teaching and learning occur (COMAR 13A.08.06.01). Known as PBIS Maryland, it is a partnership between the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Sheppard Pratt Health System, and the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence. Each of the 24 local school systems participate in the partnership. The Maryland model includes both academic and behavioral interventions that provide more intensive supports for students not responding adequately to a universal system of support.

**Social Emotional Learning and Problem Solving**

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a process where students learn to acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. The focus is on developing students’ social emotional competencies, including self-awareness (e.g., recognizing emotions, strengths and limitations, and values), self-management (e.g., regulating emotions), social awareness (e.g., taking the perspective of and empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures), relationship skills (e.g., establishing and maintaining healthy relationships), and responsible

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decision making (making constructive choices across varied situations). An intensive body of research links social emotional development to success in school and later life outcomes, including developing positive skills that reduce challenging behavior. For example, by learning targeted social and emotional skills, children are better able to manage their emotions and express them in a socially appropriate way. Social emotional learning is augmented when coordinated with other approaches that promote positive school climates and the development of students’ intrapersonal, interpersonal and cognitive competence.

**Early Education**

Investing in early education capitalizes on learning that takes place in the early years of a child’s life. Because gaps in both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities emerge early in a child’s life, before a child enters school, early education is vital for developing cognitive, social-emotional and behavioral skills that lead to later success in school and life. Experiences in the early years of life are of critical importance for establishing the brain architecture that will shape future cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral development as well as physical and mental well-being. Research on early childhood development have emphasized the many ways that children learn how to self-reflect, pace and motivate themselves. Learning these skills early help children regulate their behavior and emotions, leading to lower incidents of misbehavior throughout their school years. In addition, participation in early childhood education leads to statistically significant reductions in special education placement and grade retention and increases high school graduation rates.

**Empathic Discipline**

Evidence suggests that a punitive response to misbehavior can alienate students, leading to an increase in the oppositional and destructive behaviors it aimed to prevent. To counter this, an empathic response prioritizes valuing and understanding students’ perspectives, experiences, and feelings that give rise to misbehavior, building and sustaining relationships based on trust and respect, and working with students to improve behavior. Research found that developing

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14 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). *What is SEL?* [https://casel.org/what-is-sel/](https://casel.org/what-is-sel/)


Providing Health and Wellness Support

Addressing Childhood Trauma: Trauma-Informed Schools/Approaches

Increasingly, school personnel are recognizing, understanding, and responding to how trauma affects student behavior and learning in school. Traumatic events include the everyday stress and trauma that are the result of childhood experiences such as chronic abuse or neglect, family or community violence, homelessness, poverty, food insecurity, incarceration, and other adverse experiences. There is a growing awareness of the prevalence of exposure to violence among youth and an increasing understanding of the corrosive impacts resulting from biological, psychological, and social adaptations to chronic exposure to trauma. Such adverse experiences undermine students’ ability to learn, form relationships, and manage their feelings and behavior and place them at increased risk for negative academic, social, emotional and occupational outcomes.

School-based approaches that are trauma informed can ameliorate the effects of traumatic stress. As outlined by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP),

Trauma-sensitive schools promote (a) feelings of physical, social, and emotional safety in students; (b) a shared understanding among staff about the impact of trauma and adversity on students; (c) positive and culturally responsive discipline policies and practices; (d) access to comprehensive school mental and behavior health services; and (e) effective community collaboration. Importantly, trauma-sensitive school approaches fit well within a multitiered system of support (MTSS) framework.

A trauma-informed approach is based on the principles of creating a sense of safety, trust, and transparency; collaboration, empowerment and fostering voice and choice; and recognition of cultural, historical, and gender issues. Given the complex and varied presentation of trauma symptoms, intervention is based on an assessment of each student’s needs and include multitiered systems of support, positive learning climates, and well-trained staff. The involvement of specialized support personnel, such as school psychologists, school counselors,
and school social workers, is critical to helping educators develop the skills and strategies needed to detect and teach traumatized students.  

**Invest in Counselors, Social Workers, and Mental Health Professionals**

Schools in the United States under-invest in mental health professionals. Data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) finds that Latino, Asian, and Black students are more likely than white students to attend a school with a sworn law officer enforcement officer (SLEO), including school resource officers, than a school with a school counselor. In the 2015-16 school year, schools reported having more than 27,000 SROs, compared to 23,000 social workers. In Maryland, while many schools have at least one full time counselor, they have extremely high caseloads. A report from the Center for American Progress found that while 83% of schools in Maryland had one full time counselor, the average number of students per counselor was between 431-500. Because of the lack of access to mental health professionals in the schools, many students, particularly students of color and those suffering from trauma, receive harsh discipline rather than the mental health supports they need.

**Conclusion**

Implementation is key to the success of all of these approaches. We know from implementation research that increased awareness of a problem and access to specific tools to address it are not enough to sustain a new approach over time. Sustained implementation also requires comprehensive delivery systems that develop individual capacity and foster organizational change. Effective and ongoing professional development helps to build school and district capacity, sustain long-term implementation, and account for staff turnover and the induction of new staff. It is also important to evaluate outcomes to determine how these approaches are working and to gather information to make mid-course changes as needed. Outcome evaluations should be long-term and use mixed method approaches to capture both outcomes as well as identify which practices are working.

While this review describes school-based approaches to school discipline as alternatives to the use of school police, it is important to remember that the root causes of youth misbehavior are

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a “combination of individual, relationship, and community risk factors.” This suggests that a multifaceted, community-based, preventative strategy that takes into account public health, social welfare, and public safety is also needed.

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