

# Safe and Supportive School Climates Are Essential to Preventing Violence in Schools

## Testimony to House Public Education Committee

Targeted and mass school violence is the “tip of the iceberg” of pain, despair, and isolation that many students in Texas deal with on a daily basis. To reduce school violence, the U.S. Secret Service calls for strategies that “create cultures and climates of safety, respect, and emotional support within schools.” The Texas Legislature should provide school districts with guidance and resources to implement strategies that create safe and supportive school climates in order to reduce the likelihood of youth violence and its underlying factors.

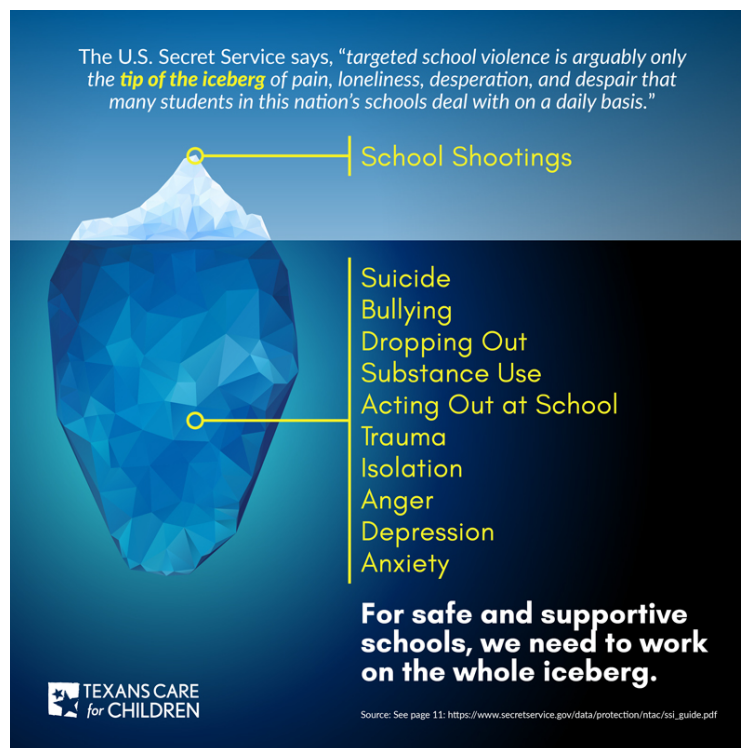
## Background

Threat risk assessments alone will not make schools more safe. Upstream prevention strategies are needed to protect students from violence and associated risks. The U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education advise that threat assessment protocols be implemented in a larger context of strategies to ensure that schools offer their students safe and secure learning environments.<sup>1</sup> Based on the best research and evidence to date on what works in preventing youth violence, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) echoes the Secret Service and Dept. of Education when it calls for broad youth prevention strategies that:<sup>2</sup>

1. **Foster social connectedness and a positive school climate.**
2. **Build student skills and competencies to chose nonviolent, safe behaviors.**
3. **Build positive relationships between students and caring adults in their school and community.**

Targeted school violence represents “the tip of the iceberg” of pain, despair, and isolation that many students deal with on a daily basis. School shootings are horrific, but thankfully rare. More common are public health and education concerns that share common risk and protective factors with youth violence and can be equally as devastating to families and communities, such as bullying and other forms of youth violence, substance abuse, mental disorders, and suicide. Recently released results from the Texas Youth Risky Behavior Surveillance Survey report that in 2017:

- 12 percent of Texas high school students – one out of eight – attempted suicide in the last year.
- 34 percent of Texas high school students – one out of three - felt sad/hopeless for 2 weeks to the point where they stopped doing some of their regular activities.
- 10 percent of Texas high school students – one out of ten – reported having experienced sexual violence in the last year.



**Zero-tolerance policies do not make schools safer and in fact are linked to negative school climates.**

Research tells us that zero tolerance policies and disciplinary practices that remove a student from their classrooms are not effective at making schools safer or changing behavior and can actually make it worse.<sup>3</sup> Threat risk assessment protocols should be used to guide the actions taken by schools and communities in responding to potential threat risks. This process should include referral pathways to ensure students

identified as being a potential risk receive appropriate assessments, interventions, and supports that keep both the identified student and those around him/her safe. Disciplinary responses should work to rebuild relationships and repair the harm that has been done while also holding students accountable.

## **Strategies to Improve School Climates, Prevent School Violence**

### ***School-wide Positive Behavior Strategies***

Positive behavior interventions and school-wide strategies establish a social culture within a school that promotes social, emotional, and academic success. The three-tiered model starts with universal supports for all students, increased supports for at-risk students, and provides intensive, highly individualized interventions for students needing wraparound services. Many schools are adopting positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) models that emphasize strategies to support students' social and emotional development, such as character education, social skill instruction, and bullying prevention.

- ✓ Schools that implement school-wide PBIS successfully see significant improvements in school climate and reductions in bullying, peer rejection, emotional concerns, and discipline referrals and suspensions.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Building Youth Social Emotional Skills***

Social and emotional skills, such as the ability to manage emotions and behavior, resolve conflicts in healthy ways, and make responsible decisions, are critical for success in school and later adulthood. They are also strongly linked to reductions in violence. Teachers can incorporate social emotional learning opportunities into their existing curriculum, but they need guidance and support from their administrators and the state do so. School counselors are also a valuable resource in helping students develop the social, emotional, and problem-solving skills. The *Comprehensive Developmental Guidance and Counseling Program Model for Texas Public Schools* distributed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides a framework for school counselors to do so. However, the Legislative Budget Board found that school counselors in Texas are frequently overburdened with administrative tasks and high student-to-counselor ratios that prevent them from being available to address students' social and emotional development and needs of students.<sup>5</sup>

- ✓ School-wide social and emotional learning interventions, from kindergarten to high school students, show significant short and long-term improvements in academic performance, positive social behaviors, and school attendance as well as reductions in emotional distress, conduct problems, and drug use.

## ***Trauma-Informed Schools***

Most youth who have committed mass gun violence in school had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.<sup>6</sup> It's estimated that 24 percent of children/youth in Texas have a history of multiple traumas (reported prior to Hurricane Harvey in 2017); 20 percent of high school student in Texas report having been bullied in 2017. The overwhelming majority of students who have experienced trauma and loss will not turn to violence. However, it is critical that all educators be trained to recognize potential symptoms of trauma and know how to respond in ways that help students heal and be successful in school, instead of being further harmed, which can happen when traditional behavior management and disciplinary responses are used.<sup>7</sup> It is important for teachers to have a mindset not of "what's wrong with you?" but instead "what happened to you?"

- ✓ School-wide trauma-informed interventions have shown to improve students' coping skills and their sense of emotional and physical safety.<sup>8</sup>
- ✓ Trauma-informed interventions are associated with decreased office discipline referrals, physical aggression incidents, and out-of-school suspensions.<sup>9</sup>

## ***School-Based Prevention and Interventions Services for At-Risk Students***

Prevention and early intervention programs buffer students from things in their lives that place them at increased risk for violence, along with a wide range of other negative education and social outcomes. School counselors can be used to provide a range of prevention and intervention services to students, if they are given the time and support to do so. Programs like Communities in Schools (CIS), Services to At-Risk Youth (STAR), and school-based substance abuse prevention and intervention programs can also be used by schools to help address youth challenges that interfere with students' health, safety and education – and reduce the likelihood youth will engage in or be victimized by violence.

Some students require services that are best provided by mental health professionals. Mental health providers, such as school social workers, licensed professional counselors, or psychologists can be employed directly by the district or through a school partnership with a community provider to help address the mental health needs of students through prevention, early intervention, treatment, and referral services.

- ✓ Students are more likely to seek mental health supports when they are available on their school campus.<sup>10</sup>
- ✓ Students who receive school-based mental health services report greater connection to school and more caring relationships with adults at school.<sup>11</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

School districts in Texas need guidance and support from the state in order to implement school-wide and targeted practices known to prevent youth violence and associated risk factors. The Texas Legislature should provide school districts with training, technical assistance, and resources to put effective strategies into practice.

- 1. Establish a state center focused on student mental health, behavior, and school climate, similar to the current Texas School Safety Center.** The School Safety Center, housed at Texas State University and funded by the state, is a central location that school districts can turn to for research, training, and technical assistance on school safety and security. To ensure schools are safe and supportive, ISDs also need to know where they can turn for guidance on implementing both campus-wide and youth-targeted practices that develop social-emotional skills in students; are trauma-informed; and provide school-based mental health services and supports to students who need them.
- 2. Expand the use of research-based youth prevention programs, practices, and policies shown to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors in students.** Violence is interconnected with other public health and education concerns, such as bullying and suicide, and shares common factors with things like substance abuse, delinquency, and school dropout. Expanding the reach of evidence-based prevention programming, like those supported by HHSC for school-based youth substance abuse prevention and intervention, increases healthy coping and social skills in students, gives kids tools to resolve conflicts or manage anxiety, and helps students develop strong self-esteem and make healthy decisions - all competencies that protect students from violence and a broad range of problems. Yet these prevention programs only reach about half of the school districts in Texas. Many other prevention programs that target bullying, delinquency, dating violence, or suicide use similar skill building strategies and target a common set of risk and protective factors.
- 3. Require and support the use of threat risk assessment protocols that are proven and properly implemented.** The majority of threats made by students are not serious. Schools should conduct an evidence-based threat assessment to distinguish credible threats from non-credible ones and to make the appropriate referrals when necessary. Threat risk assessment protocols should include clear referral pathways that connect identified students with services and supports they need to keep them and those around them healthy and safe. Students should be provided necessary services or treatment in the least restrictive setting that is safe and appropriate.
- 4. Increase student access to school counselors and school-based mental health professionals.** Districts need funding and guidance on how to increase student access to professionals who can support their social-emotional development and mental health. School counselors must be given time to address student's social emotional development and not be overburdened with non-counseling administrative

tasks. Mental health providers, such as school social workers, licensed professional counselors, or psychologists, can be employed directly by the district or through a partnership with a community provider to help address the needs of students with more significant mental health concerns. The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) and the Texas Education Agencies (TEA) should provide districts and community-based mental health providers with guidance on forming effective partnerships to increase student access to mental health services.

5. **Do not roll back the smart discipline policies that have been put in place in Texas.** Research tells us that zero tolerance policies and disciplinary practices that remove a student from their classrooms are not effective at making schools safer or changing behavior and can actually make it worse.<sup>12</sup> Any disciplinary response that is taken should work to rebuild relationships and repair the harm that has been done while also holding students accountable. Threat risk assessment protocols should be used to guide the actions taken by schools and communities in responding to potential threat risks. This process should include referral pathways to ensure students identified as being a potential risk receive appropriate assessments, interventions, and supports that keep both the identified student and those around him/her safe.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Dept. of Education. (2002) *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Preventing Youth Violence: Opportunities for Action*.

<sup>3</sup> American Psychological Association. (2006). *Zero Tolerance Policies Are Not as Effective as Thought in Reducing Violence and Promoting Learning in School, Says APA Task Force*. <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2006/08/zero-tolerance.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> See Horner, R. H., Sugai, G., & Anderson, C. M. (2010). "Examining the evidence base for school-wide positive behavior support". *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 42, 1–14.; Sawka-Miller, K. D., & Miller, D. N. (2007). "The Third Pillar: Linking Positive Psychology and School-Wide Positive Behavior Support." *School Psychology Forum: Research in Practice*, 2, 26–38.; Horner, R. H., Sugai, G., Smolkowski, K., Eber, L., Nakasato, J., Todd, A. W., & Esperanza, J. (2009). "A randomized, wait-list controlled effectiveness trial assessing School-Wide Positive Behavior Support in elementary schools." *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 11, 133–144.

<sup>5</sup> Texas Legislative Budget Board. (2011). "School counselors, librarians, and nurses in Texas public schools." *Texas State Government Effectiveness and Efficiency*.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Dept. of Education. (2002) *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention School Attacks in the United States*.

<sup>7</sup> Porche, M.V., Fortuna, L.R., Lin, J., & Alegria, M. (2011). "Childhood trauma and psychiatric disorders as correlates of school dropout in a national sample of young adults." *Child Development*, 82(3), 982–998.

<sup>8</sup> Walkley M, Cox TL. (2013) "Building trauma-informed schools and communities." *Children & Schools*. 35(2):123-126.

<sup>9</sup> Dorado, J., Martinez, M., McArthur, L., & Leibovitz, T. (2016). "Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS): A whole-school, multi-level, prevention and intervention program for creating trauma-informed, safe and supportive schools." *School Mental Health*, 8, 163-176.

<sup>10</sup> Slade, E. (2002). "Effects of school-based mental health programs on mental health services use by adolescents at school and in the community." *Mental Health Service Research*. (4) 151:166.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Stone et. al. (2013) "The Relationship Between Use of School-Based Health Centers and Student-Reported School Assets," *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 53(4):526-32.

<sup>12</sup> American Psychological Association. (2006). *Zero Tolerance Policies Are Not as Effective as Thought in Reducing Violence and Promoting Learning in School, Says APA Task Force*. <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2006/08/zero-tolerance.aspx>