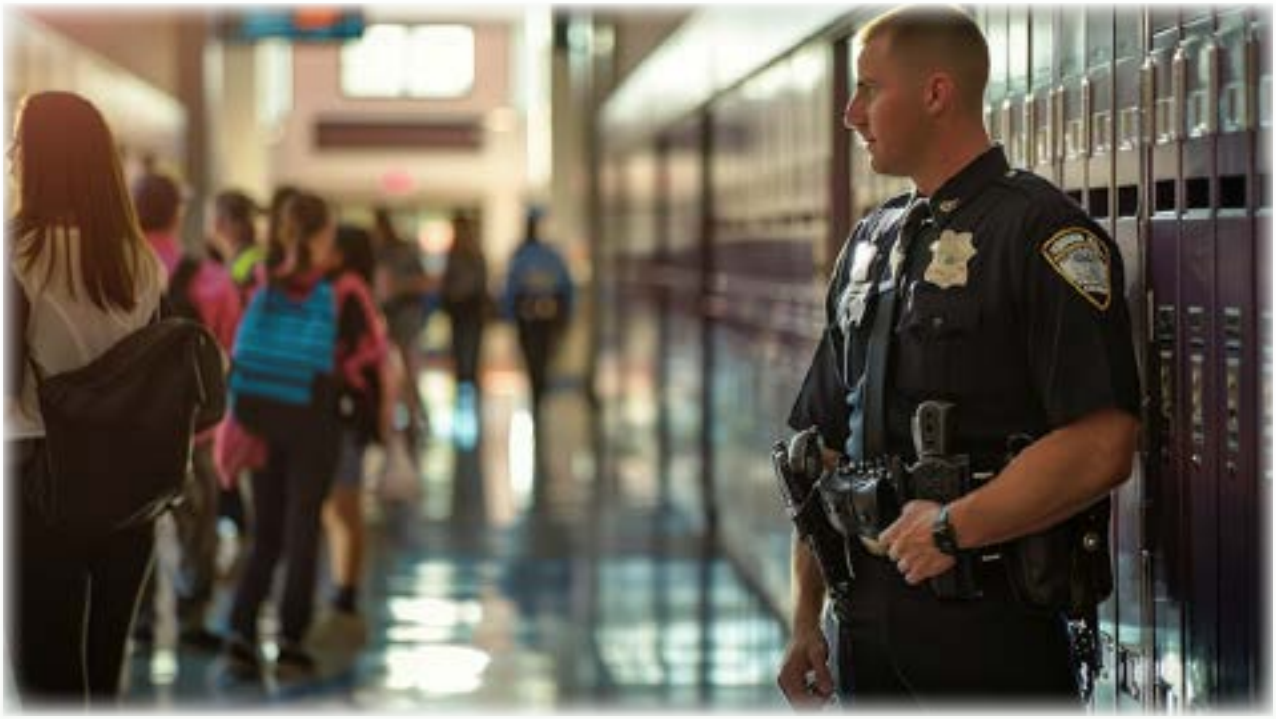
Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place? Disentangling the Intersections of Student Behavior, School Discipline, and School Safety in the Post-COVID Era



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I. Executive Summary

Student behavior, educators' perceptions of student behavior, and the management of perceived misbehavior in classrooms and schools were urgent concerns even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-pandemic, they have only grown in urgency. To better understand what is known about student behavior, school discipline policies, and school safety post-COVID, this policy brief examines the historical and contemporary relationship between student behavior and school safety.

School discipline and school safety are interrelated topics. But they are also distinct and have been conflated by policymakers and others who discuss them as a singular or combined challenge in K-12 education. School safety can involve violent behavior as well as instances of harm or clear and present risk of harms. School discipline is concerned with the everyday, non-violent, non-severe, subjective interpretation of and response to how students behave in classrooms and schools.

Policymakers' conflation of these two topics can be traced back to the 1990s. School discipline problems are often framed as a school safety issue, and school safety reforms are offered as a solution to challenges in student behavior, without full consideration of the implications for longstanding disparities in students' disciplinary outcomes. Some politicians and appointees have connected school shootings to discipline reform efforts, such as limiting suspension or introducing restorative practices.

In many ways, the problem with conflating school safety with school discipline originated in federal government policy. Laws such as the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement

Act and the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) frame exclusionary school discipline practices as the means by which to address safety concerns. The "tough-on-crime" approach these laws ushered into schools, known as "securitization," mushroomed into schools incorporating ever more aspects of the criminal justice system into the management of student behavior. The spread of securitization practices and policies, such as hiring school resource officers (SROs) and installing technologies like metal detectors and video surveillance, exemplify the conflation of positing school safety reforms to address school discipline concerns regarding the management of student behavior. Securitization and other discipline-as-safety measures are not only associated with adverse implications for the disciplinary experiences and outcomes of students of color, especially for Black students, but they also fail to make schools safer. In other words, responses to student behavior not supported by research evidence can create more problems than they solve.

Districts and schools are continuing to grapple with the aftereffects of COVID-19. The pandemic worsened existing inequities and increased the needs and trauma of students and educators in schools. The pandemic affected the mental health of everyone involved in schooling and shaped not only student behavior but also the perception and response to misbehavior. These realities heighten challenges for teachers, school leaders, and district officials seeking to make schools safe and provide an inclusive learning environment for all students. The increase in student misbehavior, particularly verbal and physical aggression, can also have adverse effects on teacher retention and recruitment. And the pandemic's adverse impact on the mental health and well-being of both students and educators has far outpaced supports. In response to the post-pandemic uptick in student misbehavior, states are hardening their approach to managing student behavior by accelerating various forms of exclusionary discipline, reverting to exclusionary policies at the state and district levels, giving additional discretion to teachers to remove students from classrooms, and securitizing schools.

The pandemic affected the mental health of everyone involved in schooling and shaped not only student behavior but also the perception and response to misbehavior.

The distinction between school safety and school discipline is crucial as the definition of the problem shapes and constrains policy solutions. When schools conflate discipline problems with safety, they often respond to an uptick in behavioral challenges with harsher school safety measures, such as SROs and metal detectors. Although only a minor proportion of school discipline infractions are serious offenses, they seem to play a major role in shaping the direction of both school discipline reforms and school safety initiatives. Disentangling school discipline from school safety is essential to creating safer schools and restoring instructional time robbed from Black students when they have experienced exclusionary discipline.

A growing evidence base provides some insights on how to do this. They include investing in supportive approaches to behavior management, bolstering support for educators and students, and addressing the underlying forces that shape student behavior and educators' perceptions and responses to misbehavior. Cascading these supports at various educational governance levels paves the way to addressing school safety and school discipline concerns as distinct issues with overlapping yet separate reforms that result in improving school safety and reducing discipline disparities. To create safer and more supportive schools, we rec-

ommend that policymakers and educational leaders take the following actions:

Federal and State-Level Policymakers:

- Provide funding for mental health support for educators and students, such as implementing evidence-based programs like hiring and retaining personnel (e.g., counselors or therapists) and adopting an Interconnected Systems Framework.
- Provide funding for coaching and professional development for educators through ESSA Title II, Part A, for evidence-based programs, such as Double Check and My Teaching Partner coaching.
- Invest in student threat assessment programs, such as by training a new team to conduct behavioral threat assessments or evaluating the effectiveness of an existing threat assessment team.
- Invest in social-emotional programs for both educators and students (e.g., collaborative consultations for teachers and curricula like Leader in Me for students) to foster a positive school climate, which in turn creates safer schools and reduces discipline disparities.

District and School Leaders:

- Prioritize educator and student well-being by investing in programs targeted to schools' contexts and needs (e.g., the Safe School Ambassador Program, Interconnected Systems Framework, and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program).
- Adopt policies that clearly define the role of SROs in schools and state how and when they can and cannot be engaged in the disciplinary process in schools.

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II. Introduction

Student behavior, educators' perceptions of students' behavior, and the management of perceived misbehavior in classrooms and schools were urgent concerns prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Since COVID-19, educators reported that behavioral issues among K-12 students have been on the rise in the U.S. A majority, 59%, of district leaders surveyed in the fall of 2021 described increased school discipline issues as a moderate or major concern.[2,3] Additionally, school shootings, though still relatively rare, have increased in recent years.[4] The uptick in student misbehavior, coupled with high-profile shooting incidents, has made school discipline and school safety two of the most important educational policy issues in the post-pandemic period.[5]

Although school discipline and school safety are separate, yet sometimes interrelated, topics, policymakers and others have often conflated the two issues and discussed them as a singular or combined challenge in K-12 education.[6,7] In this brief, we begin with defining and distinguishing between school safety and school discipline and explain why these distinctions are fundamental to making schools safer and reducing racial inequities in students' disciplinary outcomes (see Appendix Table 1 outlining similarities and differences between the two policy challenges).

School discipline is the process of responding to perceived student misbehavior and rule violations (i.e., "infractions, involvement or engagement in behaviors that violate rules"),[8] ranging in severity from out-of-uniform socks to sexual assault and guns on campus. Student behavior is managed in different ways across states, districts, and schools through a range of practices, personnel, and policies, such as school climate interventions, behavior

specialists, and codes of conduct.[9] *Exclusionary discipline* refers to policies, practices, and personnel that respond to undesired behaviors by removing students from the classroom and/or school—such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and alternative school.[10] School safety, on the other hand, "is often defined as the absence of a negative, such as the absence of violence, bullying and harassment, or substance use."[11] The NIJ-funded Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI) suggests that there are three key components of school safety: a) school climate, b) student behavior, and c) physical security.[12] Some specific misbehaviors—such as fighting, sexual assault, or bringing a weapon to campus—are both disciplinary infractions and safety issues. Despite the reality that many behavior infractions are *not* safety concerns, policymakers have a history of using exclusionary discipline tactics to respond to rises in school safety concerns.[13]

Certainly, some student behaviors may make teachers and other students feel unsafe and can raise school safety concerns, but perceptions of student behaviors, such as insubordination and disruption, are mostly subjective and require some discretion when making decisions about disciplinary consequences, such as suspensions and expulsions. As such, it is important to differentiate the severity and nature of student behavior when considering the distinctions between school discipline and school safety. While school safety is concerned with more severe and objective behavior, such as weapons possession or sexual assault, school discipline is concerned with well-documented racialized differences in how subjective disciplinary infractions (e.g., student incivility, defiance) is perceived and addressed. While school safety concerns violent behavior by students, or others, and instances of harm or clear and present risk of harms, school discipline is concerned with the everyday, nonviolent, non-severe, subjective interpretation of and response to how students behave in classrooms and schools.

Teacher and administrator perceptions and discretion are at the core of the school discipline policy challenge. Adults in schools make determinations of whether, when, and how severely a student is misbehaving or posing a threat to the safety of themselves or others. A wealth of research documents that these evaluations are rife with racial bias and stereotypes.[14] Both legitimate connections between school safety and school discipline, as well as inaccurate conflations of them, are often racialized (see Appendix Table 1).

When schools don't address discipline and safety separately, students of color, male students, and students with disabilities encounter discipline policies that cause irreparable harm. This is especially the case for Black children.[15] Race is one of the most important factors that determines how teachers and administrators view and respond to student behavior.[16] For example, when taught by a teacher who does not share their same racial or ethnic identity, Black and/or Latino[17] students are at increased risk of being rated as disruptive and inattentive.[18] These students do not misbehave more than White students. Rather, a growing number of studies pinpoint differential treatment as a key contributor to racial discipline disparities.[19, 20] For instance, a 2024 report by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that:

> Black girls comprised 15 percent of all girls in public schools but received almost half of suspensions and expulsions. Further, GAO's analysis of school year 2017–18 infraction or behavior data showed that Black girls received harsher

> punishments than White girls even when the infractions that prompted disciplinary action were similar. For example, Black girls had higher rates of exclusionary discipline compared to White girls for similar behaviors such as defiance, disrespect, and disruption. The data also show that in every state in the U.S., Black girls are disciplined at higher rates. When they also had a disability, exclusionary discipline rates of Black girls grew larger.[21]

These discipline disparities matter and are consequential for the lives and livelihoods of students. A robust literature links exclusionary discipline to worse outcomes in achievement, health, and adult well-being.[22] A 2024 report from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention highlighted the prevalence of unfair disciplinary practices, as reported by students, and the link between exclusionary discipline and a variety of health risks, calling school discipline "an urgent public health problem."[23]

Emerging post-pandemic school discipline trends mirror those pre-COVID-19, and, as students settled back into in-person learning after the pandemic, racial disparities in school discipline returned. Both the 2020-2021 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) data and state and district data reveal school discipline in the aftermath of the pandemic continues trends from prior to the pandemic.[24,25] For instance, in North Carolina, the Southern Coalition for School Justice 2022-2023 Racial Equity Report Cards found that Black students were roughly four times more likely to receive a short-term suspension than White students.[26, 27]

This policy brief examines the historical and contemporary relationship between student behavior and school safety to determine what we know about student behavior, school discipline policies, and school safety post-COVID. We review several different forms of interdisciplinary research including literature reviews, surveys, journal articles, and reports on student behavior post-pandemic, mental health, school discipline, school safety, and post-pandemic stressors. First, we discuss the intersection of school safety and school discipline going back to the 1990s. Next, we delve deeper into how the pandemic may have shaped the dynamics of student behavior and the response of states and districts, via school discipline policy, to the post-pandemic uptick in student misbehavior. We conclude with recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

III. Review of the Literature: The Historical Relationship Between School Discipline and School Safety

Conflating School Discipline With School Safety Prior to the Pandemic

Since the 1990s, policymakers conflated school safety and school discipline. School discipline problems are often framed as a school safety issue, and school safety reforms are offered as a solution to challenges in student behavior without full consideration of the implications for longstanding disparities in students' disciplinary outcomes. Some politicians and appointees have connected school shootings to discipline reform efforts, such as limiting suspension or introducing restorative practices.[28] For example, in 2013, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida implemented a school-based diversion program that provided

behavioral supports, counseling, mentoring, and connections to county-funded wraparound services to students involved in nonviolent infractions.[29] This program, called PROMISE, served students when their disciplinary infractions were not violent in nature but their infractions made them eligible for out-of-school suspension and/or juvenile arrest.[30] Florida Senator Marco Rubio and others blamed this program for the mass shooting of 14 students and three staff which occurred there in 2018, despite the fact that commissions investigating the shooting found no relationship between the program and the tragedy.[31]

In many ways, the problem with conflating school safety with school discipline originated in federal government policy. In the 1980s and 1990s, crime rates and public concern with crime both rose.[32] In 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act and the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA). Both laws advanced "tough on crime" narratives and included similar policy mandates, such as mandatory minimum sentences for specific offenses.[33] The GFSA, which stipulates that eligibility for federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) funding hinges on state law requiring the expulsion of students with a weapon on campus, solidified the connection between school discipline policies and school safety policies and entrenched a "tough on crime" policy response in schools.[34, 35] The law frames exclusionary discipline as the means by which to address safety concerns. The GFSA also directed local education agencies to develop policies requiring school leaders to refer students with firearms at school to law enforcement. Scholars cite this requirement as the modern genesis of the school-to-prison pipeline.[36] The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 paved the way for hiring police in schools and elevated the idea that the challenge of responding to student misbehavior is equivalent to keeping students safe in schools. A zero-tolerance approach to managing student behavior unified the policy approach to both school safety and school discipline by framing the two as the same problem.

The GFSA only required zero-tolerance, mandatory-expulsion policies for weapons on campus. However, following this act, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, states applied zero tolerance and mandatory exclusion responses to a growing list of nonviolent and subjective behaviors including offenses such as fighting, defiance, and truancy.[37] Scholars attribute this growth in state and local mandatory expulsion and zero tolerance policies to the GFSA.[38]

Throughout the 2010s, changes to state discipline policies moved away from exclusionary approaches and towards less punitive policies and practices.[39] Thirty-six states enacted laws limiting the use of suspension or expulsion and 30 states provided guidance and/or funding for districts and schools to implement preventative and/or restorative behavior management and discipline policies and practices.[40] The Education Commission of the States' state legislation tracking database reveals a steep decline in the number of state zero-tolerance policies, declining from an average of five zero-tolerance policies passed annually from 2000-2004 to only seven zero-tolerance discipline laws passed from 2014-2019.[41]

The Nature and Impact of a Zero-Tolerance Approach to Student Behavior

"Zero tolerance" does not have a single, consistent meaning.[42] For example, the federal Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights defines zero tolerance as a policy that "re-

quires mandatory expulsion of any student who commits one or more specified offenses,"[43] whereas some literature uses the phrase to refer to all exclusionary discipline. Still others use the term to refer to policies and practices which perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline or "securitized" school environments.[44,45] As a result of the GFSA's impacts on funding eligibility, all 50 states and the District of Columbia require expulsion for students with weapons on campus but may or may not explicitly use zero-tolerance language.[46]

Zero-tolerance and mandatory expulsion policies function to criminalize students in schools, disproportionately impacting Black students. Policies mandating expulsion for non-weapons offenses, policies not required by the GFSA, are more common in districts serving a large proportion of racially marginalized students.[47] Zero-tolerance and mandatory expulsion policies are not linked to improvements in student behavior but are tied to widening discipline disparities between Black and White students.[48] Furthermore, they mirror and exacerbate the criminalization Black and Latinx youth experience outside of school.[49]

The Securitization Response to Student Behavior

The response to student behavior, school violence, school safety, and discipline concerns can be broadly classified into two general types of approaches: a) hardening or securitizing schools through an increase in physical security measures, surveillance technology, and security personnel, and b) a comprehensive support strategy of improving school climate and student behavior supports, alongside select physical security tactics (see Appendix Table 2).[50] Although educational leaders, nationally, are charged with strengthening their security and addressing school discipline,[51] and there is a solidifying consensus that corrective actions to address school safety are needed, there is less consensus on what to do.[52] Interest and advocacy groups, state legislators, local school boards, and governors propose an array of measures including arming teachers, increasing police officers in schools, adding security cameras, and revising school discipline policies.[53] Several states have adopted Florida's approach, following the Parkland shooting, which required or expanded armed "guardians"—school resource officers (SROs) or armed educators/staff—while also investing in mental health supports.[54]

In the two decades since the Gun-Free Schools Act's (GFSA's) passage, the "tough-on-crime" approach it ushered into schools mushroomed into schools incorporating ever more aspects of the criminal justice system. This trend, known as "securitization," also increased in response to school shootings.[55,56] While not the dominant policy response, there was also uneven investment in student- and community-centered approaches during this time.[57]

Research consistently finds that policies intended to increase safety on school campuses through securitization actually decrease students' feelings of safety.[58] Additionally, surveillance and securitization policy responses to safety concerns are disproportionately implemented in schools and districts serving large proportions of Black and brown students.[59,60] Despite the fact that proponents justify securitization using examples of extreme school violence, it is most often deployed in instances of disorderly or disruptive conduct, vandalism, and other nonviolent behaviors.[61] The spread of securitization practices and policies, such as hiring SROs and installing technologies like metal detectors and video surveillance,

exemplifies the conflation of school discipline with school safety reforms.[62]

Securitization and broader discipline-as-safety policies are best predicted by the racial composition of a school, even when controlling for school and neighborhood crime and youth delinquency.[63] Just as exclusionary discipline practices have been linked to a host of negative in- and out-of-school outcomes, securitization practices, such as metal detectors and law enforcement, are associated with worse school climate, decreased student trust of school adults, lower academic performance, increased absenteeism, and higher rates of student arrest.[64,65] These linkages perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline, which disproportionately ensnares Black and brown students.[66,67] Disparities in student arrest rates are the widest for students with intersectional marginalized racial and ability identities. Black boys and girls with a disability are arrested at rates four and three times the overall student rate, respectively.[68] Non-securitization safety policies, such as threat assessment[69] and mental health supports for students, are not associated with widening disparities, although they have not been found to consistently mitigate disparities.[70]

In addition to the negative student outcomes associated with securitization and other discipline-as-safety measures, scholars have long critiqued the failure of these policies to produce safer schools.[71] In 2010, Gregory and colleagues highlighted that "there is little research identifying the characteristics of a safe school."[72] This is still true today. Scheel and colleagues, in their 2024 review of 25 years of research on school safety in charter school settings, found that the literature focuses on perceptions of safety and incident frequency with noted gaps in safety assessment measures.[73] Suspending or expelling students does not create more effective instructional environments.[74] In a systematic review of 12 school securitization technologies, Schwartz and colleagues did not identify evidence that any of them significantly improved safety in schools, despite the fact that some, such as video monitoring, have been found to reduce property crime in non-school settings.[75] Researchers examining the outcomes associated with securitization policies, programs, and personnel frequently found increases in exclusionary disciplinary actions but no significant improvements in safety.[76] However, public health approaches and threat assessments are associated with reductions in school violence.[77]

IV. Recent Developments in Student Behavior, School Discipline, and School Safety

As pandemic-related mandates and masks fade from our recent memories, research is revealing the nature and depth of learning loss as well as the long road to academic recovery.[78] Incoming high schoolers in the 2023-2024 school year are nearly a year behind academically.[79] And the effects of the pandemic took a devastating toll on the mental health and well-being of both students and educators.[80]

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple salient changes are shaping school discipline and school safety: (a) perceived and actual worsening of student behavior, (b) deteriorating mental health of students, and (c) declining educator well-being. As detailed below, surveys and interviews with parents, educators, and medical practitioners highlight a growing and

concurrent educator and student mental health and well-being crisis.[81] Any efforts to address the discipline disparities and safety crises in schools are also complicated by the fact that student behavior is perceived through racialized lenses.[82] Furthermore, poor educator well-being is associated with poor student mental health and increased student behavior challenges.[83]

Post-COVID stressors such as the loss of parent or caregiver were widespread and disproportionately affected Black and brown communities.[84] Other COVID- related traumas that continue to shape students' behavior in the post-pandemic period include social isolation, academic struggles in remote learning, youth suicide, educator exhaustion and burnout from myriad adjustments in instructional modes, and the murder of George Floyd and its aftermath. We explore each of these factors in the contexts of how student behavior is perceived in classrooms and schools and how policymakers at all levels have responded.

Perceived and Real Worsening of Student Behavior

Multiple recent surveys suggest that student behavior is an increasing concern among educators. A December 2024 survey of teachers and school and district leaders found an overall increase, compared to 2021 and 2023, in the share of educators who said student misbehavior is worse than it was in the fall of 2019 (pre-pandemic) and an increase in those saying misbehavior is "a lot" worse.[85] The share of educators reporting more misbehavior, compared to the fall of 2019, consistently increased from 2021 through 2024.[86] A survey of teachers, principals, and district leaders conducted in 2023 found that educators at all levels were more likely to respond that student behavior is a top-five concern than they were prior to the pandemic.[87] Respondents signaled that the most common types of undesired behaviors—such as opposition and disconnect or disengagement—were the same as before the pandemic, but starkly more common.[88,89] A 2023 American Psychological Association survey found that verbal assault and threats against teachers are declining from their COVID-era peaks, but remain higher than pre-COVID levels.[90] The most recent NCES data, meanwhile, find that the percentage of teachers reporting being physically threatened or injured by a student has decreased since 2010.[91]

Educators associate changes in student behavior with the pandemic. Most principals, 84%, agreed or strongly agreed that students' behavioral development has been negatively impacted by the pandemic.[92] When asked about specific behavior changes attributable to the pandemic, 56% of principals reported increases in disruptive student misconduct, 48% reported increased disrespect of teachers and staff, and 33% reported an increase in fights or physical attacks.[93] Teachers and support staff, such as school-based social workers, connected a rise in concerning behaviors, ranging from disengagement to physical fights, to isolation and trauma students endured during the pandemic.[94] Although many school and district leaders acknowledged social, emotional, and psychological harms students experienced throughout the pandemic, they framed exclusionary discipline as a necessary response to student misbehavior and the need to keep students from falling further behind in the wake of pandemic-related learning loss.[95]

Over the course of the pandemic, 40% of students suffered at least one adverse childhood

experience, including loss of a parent, food insecurity, or family separation.[96] By June 2021, more than 140,000 American children lost a caregiver to COVID-19.[97] These losses were not experienced evenly across the population. Although Black and Latinx individuals comprise 13% and 18% of the overall U.S. population, respectively, they composed 22% and 34% of summer 2020 COVID-19 cases. Also, the COVID-19 mortality rate was over twice as high for Black patients compared to White patients.[98] Black and Hispanic youth, respectively, were 2.4 and 1.8 times more likely than White youth to lose a parent or caregiver to COVID.[99] Medical and public health scholars understand these disparities to be shaped by the structural social determinants of health.[100,101]

Deteriorating Student Mental Health

The pandemic compounded an existing student mental health crisis that had, to some extent, flown under the radar.[102] During the pandemic, rates of stress, anxiety, and depression worsened for children and youth.[103] The 2021 CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, the first following the pandemic, highlighted the urgency of the mental health crisis. According to the survey findings, nearly half of high school students (42%) felt sad or hopeless regularly, compared to 26% in 2009.[104] As of March 2024, 70% of public school teachers recommended at least one student receive mental health support or intervention in the 2023-2024 school year.[105]

National survey data consistently describe a decline in youth mental health and suggest that the mental health crisis is not analogous to concerns over school safety and youth violence.[106] Josh Weber, the director of juvenile justice programs for the Council of State Governments, noted that the surge in media and political attention on school safety and youth crime post-COVID focused on extreme cases of youth violence and neglected to report the ways in which the juvenile justice system became a common means through which youth received mental health supports.[107] Growing evidence suggests that experiencing exclusionary discipline is associated with increased odds of depression and anxiety symptoms, thus compounding the heightened needs unleashed by the pandemic.[108]

Educators nationwide report that students' mental health is in crisis.[109] When surveyed, 92% of superintendents responded that mental health crises are "worse now" than prior to the start of the pandemic, with 57% responding "significantly worse."[110] Superintendents' concerns about mental health, along with reports of in-person and online bullying, are roughly constant regardless of the proportion of low-income students their districts serve. And educators aren't the only ones who are concerned—71% of parents said the pandemic harmed their child's mental health.[111] Mental-health related emergency room visits have increased,[112] as have hospitalizations for self-harm.[113] Spikes in hospitalizations for suicide attempts and depressive symptoms are aligned with the school calendar, at the start of a semester and with state testing season.[114]

Declining Educator Well-Being

Surveys of teachers' mental health in the aftermath of the pandemic are also concerning:

48% of public school teachers and 32% of private school teachers report their mental health has a negative impact on their work.[115] A spring 2024 survey of teachers who left the profession found that burnout was a contributing factor for over 70% of former teachers.[116] While survey data on educator mental health do not reach a consensus regarding whether there have been improvements or declines in 2023 and 2024, it is apparent that teacher well-being has declined compared to before the pandemic, and teachers are doing far worse than other working adults.[117,118] Teachers who reported that their own mental health has a negative impact on their work were more likely to also respond that students' mental health had a negative impact on academic and behavioral outcomes in the classroom.[119]

The limited evidence on the relationship between teacher well-being and student behavior in the wake of COVID suggests that student behavior is a source of stress and, for some teachers, a safety concern.[120] A 2023 RAND survey found that managing student behavior was the top source of job-related stress, with 46% of all teachers reporting it was one of the top three sources of stress at their job.[121] Twenty-seven percent selected "supporting my students' mental health and well-being" as one of the top three sources of stress. While 26% of teachers said they "sometimes" or "often" fear for their physical safety at school, and 31% said they rarely fear for their safety at school, over half of those with safety fears attributed their fear to student misbehavior. Over half of teachers responding that they fear for their physical safety were afraid of an active shooter at the school, and a third were afraid of students' physical fights.[122] A systematic review on teachers' depression and anxiety found that teachers reporting more student problem behaviors and worse school climate report depression and anxiety at higher rates than teachers reporting fewer problem behaviors and/or stronger school climate.[123] Relatedly, teachers who reported higher confidence managing student behaviors reported fewer symptoms of depression or anxiety and lower intentions to leave teaching.[124]

Post-COVID-19 Changes in School Discipline Policy

How are districts and schools responding to the all-time highs in students' and teachers' mental health needs? The emerging evidence suggests that districts and schools that are changing their discipline policies to respond to changes in student behavior in the post-pandemic era. However, they are continuing to conflate school discipline and school safety. As we discuss below, the policy response at state and district levels often resembles a return to zero-tolerance,[125] or a ramping up of some forms of exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions or assignments to alternative school, or a slowdown in policies endorsing non-exclusionary punishment.

Education law scholar Thalia Gonzalez describes the contemporary school discipline policy landscape as a "period of retrenchment."[126] Indeed, changes in student behavior, and the public dialogue around the changes, tend to provoke political and policy attention to school discipline.[127] In 2023, state and local school discipline policy in many states received media attention for expanding exclusionary approaches. State legislation commonly expanded or protected teachers' ability to remove students from classrooms (sometimes by force) or repealed restrictions on suspensions for elementary students.[128]

Since the onset of COVID-19, 37 states have enacted 163 legislative changes to school discipline policy. Most of these laws (96 of 163) modify the guidelines for administering punitive discipline. In the 2023 legislative cycle, 20 of the 26 bills on punitive discipline widened the use of exclusionary punishment.[129] Relatedly, the number of states allowing students to be excluded for "defiant" or "disruptive" behavior increased to 40 in the post-COVID period.[130] These developments are particularly concerning given that subjective offenses like "disruptive" behavior drive racial disparities in students' disciplinary outcomes.[131] The number of states allowing exceptions to statutory limits on exclusionary discipline, such as bans on suspensions for K-2 students, also increased post-COVID.[132] Such legislation used language describing students in criminalizing or adultifying ways, such as Illinois HB219, which allows for restraint or solitary time-out if the student poses an "imminent danger." Legislation like this can legitimize a pathway through which Black children may be subjected to physically harsh exclusionary discipline once they are deemed a "danger" by school staff.[133] The numbers of bills or laws which offer guidelines for narrowing punitive discipline or alternatives to punitive discipline is also shrinking, which is a stark shift from Obama-era state school discipline policy. Then, many states passed reforms banning the use of suspension for certain offenses—like truancy or disrespect—or in specific grade bands such as pre-K-2.[134]

The political response to post-pandemic behavior incidents is bipartisan, a notable divergence from pre-pandemic political action on school discipline policy.[135] Media coverage of state legislative activity on school discipline highlights that new laws not only authorize stricter punishments for students deemed disruptive, but also lower the bar for what is considered disruptive to include behavior like using profanity or exhibiting willful disobedience.[136] Similarly, new laws—such as Rhode Island S2578, Tennessee HB16, and Tennessee S1755—all widen the use of exclusionary punishment. These bills implicitly describe student behavior as not responsive to school-based intervention, using language like "the student is not benefiting from the student's assignment to the alternative school."[137] Teachers' unions in states ranging from Nevada to Massachusetts publicly supported more exclusionary school discipline policies.[138]

School Discipline Policy at the District Level

Following the murder of George Floyd, many school districts also revised school discipline and school safety policies by canceling or restricting the presence of law enforcement and/or school resource officers (SROs).[139] Many districts, including Minneapolis, Denver, and Portland, fully ended their relationship with local police departments, while others, like Los Angeles, amended their contracts to reduce police presence at school. These policy changes were typically paired with an investment in social workers, mental health professionals, or other student supports.[140] Districts also invested resources in staff and programming aiming to better address the root causes of student behavior by, for instance, adding behavior analysts in Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky, or expanding restorative justice in New York City.[141] Teachers also reported that, upon returning to school in the fall of 2020, administrators emphasized the need to give students "grace," thus, connecting changes in student behavior to both the racial justice reckoning and the collective trauma students endured during the pandemic.[142] But, unlike removing police from schools or hiring support staff,

"grace" is not a formal policy commitment. Some districts implemented a discipline matrix to create consistency between schools regarding how teachers and administrators should address student behaviors.[143] Districts also amended their codes of conduct in response to investigations by the federal government during this period. For example, following federal investigations, Wichita, Kansas, introduced a tiered system to determine the response for specific offenses, and Rapid City, South Dakota, implemented restrictions on the use of law enforcement in school discipline.[144]

In contrast, motivated by changes in student behavior, some districts revised their codes of conduct to endorse more exclusionary discipline post-COVID—even reversing earlier policy changes like those described above. Common revisions included allowing teachers to remove students from their classrooms or widening the circumstances in which administrators can suspend students—by, for instance, expanding eligibility for suspension by adding more offense types and/or decreasing the number of qualifying offense occurrences.[145] Some districts that initially implemented discipline matrices to encourage more consistent and less exclusionary responses to misbehavior amended their matrices to emphasize when and how students can be suspended or expelled.[146] Examples of such districts that made these changes in response to violence on school campuses include Baltimore, Detroit, and Denver. Yet, community members and advocates have questioned whether expanding exclusion will address the root causes of school violence.[147]

V. Discussion and Analysis

Attempts like those described above to revise codes of conduct may potentially reduce inequities in school discipline, especially when subjective offenses are the reported reason for exclusion. Yet, these policy changes are necessary but not sufficient to disrupt discipline disparities.[148] Changes in school discipline policy, at both the state and district levels, have led to a reduction of suspensions or the general use of exclusionary discipline, but racial disparities remain persistent. Policy changes, such as bans on suspensions for specific offenses, have been shown to decrease the overall frequency of exclusionary punishment without narrowing racial disparities.[149] Below, we discuss how educator development programs such as My Teaching Partner and Double Check (two teacher coaching interventions) *have* been effective in reducing disparities in office discipline referrals and suspensions (see Appendix Table 2 for complete list of evidence-based strategies).

The distinction between school safety and school discipline is crucial as the definition of the problem shapes and constrains policy solutions.[150] Although school safety and student discipline concerns may occasionally overlap, they are separate and distinct issues. When schools conflate discipline problems with safety, they often respond to an uptick in behavioral challenges with harsher school safety measures, such as school resource officers (SROs) and metal detectors. Although only a minor proportion of school discipline infractions are serious offenses, they seem to play a major role in shaping the direction of both school discipline reforms and school safety initiatives. Incidences of violent and physical experiences in classrooms are relatively rare and separate from incidences of Black students and students with disabilities (SWD) being disciplined for subjective offenses, which are quite commonplace.[151] In the five years prior to the pandemic, over a million suspensions were issued

for vague, subjective offense types like "disruption," "other," or "violation of student code of conduct"—over 70 percent of all suspensions in some states.[152] Black students are more likely to be suspended for such subjective reasons, and thereby lose instructional time and educational opportunity.[153]

Responding to student misbehavior by hardening schools and imposing exclusionary poses multiple problems. First, exclusionary discipline fails to address post-pandemic increases in students' needs and risks, widening inequities in students' short- and long-term academic, health, and social outcomes. Also, hardening schools typically results in educators responding to subjective, non-severe infractions as if they were more severe threats to student and teacher safety. When schools respond to subjective disciplinary infractions with exclusionary discipline, well-documented racial inequities result, with Black students largely bearing the brunt. Even when school discipline reforms lead to declines in the overall number of suspensions and expulsions, Black students still experience disproportionate levels of exclusionary discipline. Districts and schools that respond to an uptick in student behavior by giving teachers more discretion to use exclusionary discipline or by hardening schools with safety reforms, such as SROs, raise real and urgent concerns about Black students being criminalized, disproportionately referred to the office, suspended, and exposed to law enforcement for minor behavioral infractions.

When schools respond to student behavior with security measures instead of discipline reforms, students of color face heightened exposure to law enforcement instead of support. The number of SROs in schools has increased over time, to where, now, roughly half of all schools use SROs.[154] Even when safety reforms explained as school discipline responses, such as the presence of SROs, result in safety benefits like crime reduction, the benefits may come at a cost to school discipline by increasing suspension rates and worsening racial disparities in educational and well-being outcomes.[155,156] In some districts, the post-COVID debate over returning police to schools engaged with topics of racism and structural inequality. In Denver, for example, parent advocates voiced concerns that Black and brown students were disproportionately impacted by spikes in school violence but were also disproportionately harmed by police in schools.[157] A growing number of studies have highlighted the importance of clarifying the role of SROs and their engagement in the disciplinary process in schools, especially the use of non-sworn security guards relative to SROs.[158] An increase in the presence of SROs is associated with a decline in positive perceptions of school climate and safety and an increase in reports of minor incidents of misbehavior.[159] Students' encounters with SROs—especially for non-severe, subjective disciplinary infractions—and involvement with the juvenile justice system can disrupt lives and livelihoods in deeply consequential ways.[160]

Creating Safer Schools and Disrupting Discipline Disparities

So, how do we make schools safer? A 2025 review of the evidence produced by the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI) concluded that increased safety is a result of "evidence-based strategies for addressing school climate, student behavior, and physical security with consideration for the school's unique needs and resources."[161] The CSSI report emphasized that responses to concerning student behavior produce safer schools only when schools address the underlying causes of the behavior,

such as trauma or anxiety. The CSSI review of the evidence on programs and policies that create safer schools found that the key components of safe schools are: a) positive school climate, b) approaches to student behavior that "enhance the protective factors (e.g., supportive relationships) and mitigate the risk factors (e.g., deviant peers, victimization) for problem behavior and violence,"[162] and c) physical security strategies or technologies that meet data-identified needs, do not cause harm, and align with "[schools'] norms, values, and relationships."[163] While not directly naming the conflation of discipline and safety, the report arrived at a similar conclusion as we report here: Responding to concerns about misbehavior with exclusionary discipline tactics not only worsens racial disparities in discipline, but also damages school climate, slows academic gains, and does nothing to produce safer schools.[164,165] Prior scholarship has found that responding to unsatisfied mental health needs with disciplinary action likely fuels the school-to-prison pipeline.[166,167,168]

Investments in fostering a positive school climate can make schools safer and reduce discipline disparities.[169] Scholars and the federal government have found that improving school climate can reduce racial discipline inequalities.[170] These studies recommend collecting data using climate surveys to best match evidence-based climate programs, like the Safe School Ambassador Program and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, with school needs.[171] Researchers who have examined how investments in school climate can create safer schools have suggested multiple ways this happens; for example, by preventing more concerning behaviors, by creating an environment of trust, or by facilitating reporting when concerning behaviors do occur.[172] Many elements of positive school climates, which have psychosocial protective factors like high-quality teacher-student relationships and parent connectedness, can ward off students' depression and anxiety symptoms.[173]

Investments in supporting the well-being of both students and educators can also create safer schools and reduce discipline disparities. Given consideration of post-COVID stressors, it is apparent that students are not the only priority—educators also need support. Yet, educators are often left out of the conversations on how to disrupt discipline disparities. Supporting teachers and school leaders is essential to addressing the toll of the pandemic and post-pandemic recovery on educator well-being.

Another evidence-based strategy to create safer schools is the student threat assessment. Threat assessment programs that aim to prevent violence and enhance school safety have also been found to reduce student suspensions.[174] As outlined in the recently released School Threat Assessment Toolkit, there are three stages of behavioral threat assessment and management:

> (1) identifying an individual as threatening violence, (2) gathering information to assess the nature and seriousness of the threat, and (3) implementing interventions to reduce the risk that the threat will be carried out. In some cases, the interventions should be extended over time and require ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their effectiveness.[175]

Enacting stricter gun control laws in the U.S. is another, albeit polarizing, way to make schools safer. However, this is a larger social and cultural issue beyond the purview and agency of educational leaders and practitioners. As the case of Tennessee in recent years

demonstrates, investments in fortifying schools, paired with wanton gun access, makes creating safer schools a fleeting illusion. Gun violence is perhaps the biggest threat to school safety, evinced by the disturbingly frequent instances of school shootings. Even beyond Tennessee's local instances of gun violence, the national climate surrounding police at school has shifted, as 2022 set a record for the number of school shootings in a year (46).

Policies that support school administrators and teachers, by emphasizing educator-focused interventions as much as student-focused programs, constitute an important strategic direction in discipline reform.[176] Surveys have found that school leaders can support teachers in the disciplinary process by, for instance, prioritizing educator well-being and providing time for teachers to collaborate and swap best practices.[177] Research has shown that promising, evidence-based, educator-focused school discipline reforms that may reduce discipline disparities include developing an empathic mindset, coaching programs like Double Check and My Teaching Partner, and providing educators professional development in classroom management and culturally responsive practices (see Appendix Table 2).[178] Federal legislators can expand existing funding for such educator-focused professional learning programs through ESSA Title II, Part A.[179] At the federal level, legislation that promotes an ethos of support in schools, such as the Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act and the Ending PUSHOUT Act, also constitutes an important strategy for discipline reform.[180] At state and district levels, investments in discipline reform can support teachers and school leaders to respond to non-severe, subjective behaviors without resorting to exclusionary discipline by enhancing their skills, empathy, and capacity to build relationships with diverse student populations and improve classroom management. Examples are the Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF) or Okonofua and colleagues' empathetic mindset interventions.[181] Also, state policymakers can support teachers and school leaders by providing funding for coaching and professional development programs shown to help narrow racial disparities. State departments of education and teacher preparation programs can also ensure that teachers are equipped with culturally responsive classroom management practices by providing license endorsements for such training or requiring it outright, following the lead of states like Colorado and Illinois.[182] Similarly, investing in student and educator well-being and social-emotional competencies will likely have positive benefits for students' disciplinary outcomes and experiences, given the association between poor educator well-being and poor student outcomes and the documented teacher and student outcomes associated with social-emotional initiatives like Leader in Me (LiM) and collaborative consultations to foster teachers' critical reflexivity.[183]

Summing It Up

Both policymakers and researchers often lump together their responses to racial disparities in school discipline referrals and suspensions with their responses to school shooting and safety concerns. Thus, policy and research conversations about school discipline are connected and conflated with the discourse on interventions for school safety. Even though worrying trends in educators' and students' mental health and well-being have accelerated in the post-pandemic period, discipline policy has rehardened. But disentangling discipline policies from school safety issues will make schools safer and keep students, especially Black

students, in classrooms and schools.

When there are upticks in student misbehavior, state, district, and school leaders have alternatives to hardening schools. These include investing in supportive approaches to behavior management, bolstering support for educators and students, and addressing the underlying forces that shape student behavior and educators' perceptions and responses to misbehavior. Federal and state policymakers can play an instrumental role in funding additional school personnel and educator-focused programs to help support the management of student behavior. Leaders in education policymaking and provision, at all levels of government, have a role to play in prioritizing and investing in more mental health support for students and educators, including investing in access to mental health services for both educators and students and evidence-based programs that reduce discipline disparities.[184] Cascading these supports is a pathway to not only improving school safety but also to reducing discipline disparities.

VI. Recommendations

Addressing student behavior challenges and unprecedented learning loss and heightened student and educator needs in the post-pandemic world is an important educational policy and equity matter. School safety is not school discipline, even though the two issues overlap in the most violent infractions where students pose a threat to themselves, peers, and teachers or their schooling environment. To achieve the separate goals of creating safer schools and reducing racial inequities in exclusionary discipline, we recommend that policymakers follow the evidence-based pathway outlined below:

Federal and State-Level Policymakers:

- Provide funding for mental health support for educators and students, such as implementing evidence-based programs like hiring and retaining personnel (e.g., counselors or therapists) and adopting an Interconnected Systems Framework.
- Provide funding for coaching and professional development for educators through ESSA Title II, Part A, for evidence-based programs, such as Double Check and My Teaching Partner coaching.
- Invest in student threat assessment programs, such as by training a new team to conduct behavioral threat assessments or evaluating the effectiveness of an existing threat assessment team.
- Invest in social-emotional programs for both educators and students (e.g., collaborative consultations for teachers and curricula like Leader in Me for students) to foster a positive school climate, which in turn creates safer schools and reduces discipline disparities.

District and School Leaders:

- Prioritize educator and student well-being by investing in programs targeted to schools' contexts and needs (e.g., the Safe School Ambassador Program, Interconnected Systems Framework, and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program).
- Adopt policies that clearly define the role of SROs in schools and state how and when they can and cannot be engaged in the disciplinary process in schools.

Appendix

Table 1: Differences and Overlaps Between School Safety and School Discipline

	"Safety is often defined as the absence of a negative (such as the absence of violence, bullying and harassment, or substance use) . . . but rather [is] the existence of positive elements such as interconnection, belonging, voice, and agency."[185] Many scholars understand safety as the product of positive school climate: "safe and supportive learning environments . . . promote student well-being and academic success"[186] Policymakers and law enforcement personnel often frame school safety as about crime and the "real or perceived threat of youth violence."[187]	The "disciplinary process [proceeds] from perceived misbehavior to exclusionary disciplinary consequences . . . [encompassing] the relationship between the prevalence, differential selection, and differential processing of office discipline referral (ODRs) and suspensions."[188] Misbehavior "also referred to as infraction, describes involvement or engagement in behaviors that violate rules."[189]
Student Behavior of Interest	Severe, serious, threatening	Subjective, non-severe, minor, non-serious
	Students within a school—e.g., group fights and school shooters from inside school Outside threats—e.g., shooters from outside of school	Disruptive students inside classrooms, hallways, and on the school bus Teachers and school leaders responding to student behavior
Key Research Evidence Motivating Policy Problem	Increase in school shootings	Persistent racial disparities afflicting largely Black students

	Social "control is deeply embedded in the design of safety and discipline policies and practices in educational settings, resulting in the creation of exclusionary forms of discipline, the placement of physical barriers around spaces of learning, and the increasing use of law enforcement on campuses."[190] "Deficit narratives describing school environments and young people frame exclusionary discipline and policies of control as crucial to achieving and maintaining school safety. Not only do these practices and policies often fail to achieve school or public safety, but they often cause harm to young people…"[191] "The discipline code of conduct refers to the guidelines put in place to ensure that students can engage in learning without distractions. It is also designed to sustain and maintain school safety."[192]	
	Perceptions and judgements of 'safety threats' are often racialized, shaped by implicit and/or explicit bias. The behavior of Black and brown boys and girls is often interpreted through racial tropes (e.g., "Jezebel," "angry Black girl," "dangerous Black man"); even when schools have identical safety ratings and technologies, non-Black parents and students rate predominantly Black schools as less safe than schools with other racial compositions.[193] Securitization (e.g., metal detectors, cameras) and school police are more prevalent in schools serving mostly students of color—especially Black students. Furthermore, "in predominantly Black enrollment schools, SROs see their role as protecting staff and students from the students themselves."[194] 'School safety' concerns emerged in the late 1960s amid youth activism for and against racial justice on college and high school campuses. Safety discourse surged in the 1980s in connection with the War on Drugs, which disproportionately brought securitization measures to schools serving students of color and low-income students.[195]	Subjective disciplinary offenses like "disrespect" or "disruptive behavior" are subject to educator discretion. Discretion is subject to centuries-old stereotypes and biases. For example, research documents that Black students are more likely than students of other races to be perceived as adultlike, threatening, or criminal by adults in schools.[196] Racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes are driven by racial disparities in referral and exclusion rates for subjective offenses.[197] Racial disparities in exclusionary discipline emerged after school integration and are best understood as one of many educational manifestations of structural racism. As early as 1975, the Children's Defense Fund issued reports on racial disparities in discipline, spotlighting how discipline policies were used to exclude Black children from "integrated" schools.[198]

Table 2: Evidence-Based Strategies to Make Schools Safer and Reduce Discipline Disparities

	State policies on the roles and responsibilities of school resource officers District weapons policies (e.g., what "counts" as a weapon for mandatory expulsion) Emergency Operations Plans (i.e., detailing how staff respond in the event of a fire, active shooter, etc.)[201]	District Codes of Conduct Guidance on reporting/ referring (e.g., chart of office-managed or classroom-managed behaviors) State discipline policies (e.g., suspension bans for K-2 or as a consequence for truancy)[202]
	Student Threat Assessment[203] Securitization (e.g., installing metal detectors, requiring student IDs, surveillance cameras, fencing/ restrictions on points of access, presence of drug dogs, clear backpacks, weapon detection software, shatter-resistant film)[204] Partnerships between school districts and law enforcement School Climate	School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)[205] Restorative practices[206] Social Emotional Learning[207] Empathy Intervention[208] Project REACT[209] GREET-STOP-PROMPT[210] Culturally Responsive Teaching[211] Double Check model[212] Student self-affirmations[213] Coaching and professional development[214] Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF)[215] School climate interventions
		Behavior specialists supporting students and educators in the disciplinary process Paraprofessionals or teachers assigned to administer in-school suspension (ISS) Restorative coordinators and personnel supporting the implementation of programs[217]

Notes and References

1 In a 2019 survey on the frequency of disruptive behaviors over the last three years, between 29-45 percent of school and district administrators, teachers, and support staff responded that there are "more now"– and 29-39 percent said there are "significantly more now." Specifically, teachers reported the following behaviors to be "frequent" (several times a week) or "very frequent" (several times a day): (a) disruptions: tantrums or oppositional defiance (52% report), (b) unresponsiveness (46%), bullying (21%), or (c) verbal abuse of other students (19%).

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55 Although overall school safety has improved over time, the trend is markedly different for school shootings. Media and researchers have documented large increases in school shootings and school mass shootings since the 2017-2018 school year. 2021–22, the most recent year for which federal data are available, set the record for the most school shootings with casualties – 188. This is over twice as high as the next-highest number (93), documented in the 2020-2021 year. Prior to the 2021-22 school year, the largest year-to-year change in either direction was 47%. Since 2010, the rate of nonfatal criminal victimization at schools (e.g., theft, assault) has significantly decreased. Federal data, however, tell a notably different story: School-based violence, such as theft and assault, and bullying declined in the most recent rounds of data collection. Only school shootings increased, continuing pre-pandemic trends on both fronts.

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See also:

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57 Even as discipline-as-safety securitization policies proliferated, schools and policymakers concurrently adopted student- and community-centered safety approaches, such as violence prevention and social-emotional learning initiatives. The federal government's first major investment in non-securitization safety initiatives was the 1998 Safe Schools, Healthy Students Initiative, which allowed states to invest funding in programs and personnel ranging from decreasing counselor-student ratios to mental health treatment. Under the Obama administration, the Supportive School Discipline Initiative and Comprehensive School Safety Initiative funded research on the causes of school violence and evidence-based practices to disrupt school violence. These initiatives provided funds to schools implementing non-exclusionary means of addressing student behavior (e.g., PBIS or restorative practices).

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Welch, K. & Payne, A.A. (2025). Unequal "in"security: How differential school security approaches discriminate against students of color. In *Handbook of Anti-Discriminatory Education* (pp. 1–15). Springer, Cham. Retrieved February 3, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47411-8_69-1

Tanner-Smith and colleagues found that securitization decreased the likelihood of property crime, but were otherwise associated with worse safety outcomes.

Tanner-Smith, E.E., Fisher, B.W., Addington, L.A., & Gardella, J.H. (2018). Adding security, but subtracting safety? Exploring schools' use of multiple visible security measures. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, *43*(1), 102–119. Retrieved July 4, 2024, from https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-017-9409-3

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69 While some disproportionalities in threat assessment exist with respect to race and disability status, they are not consistently statistically significant. When statistically significant, they are significantly smaller than disparities associated with traditional exclusionary responses. Although some scholars have raised equity concerns about threat assessment and students' rights, schools implementing a threat assessment approach to safety also experience declines in their suspension rates – which stands to benefit students most at risk of exclusion. Unlike exclusionary discipline, neither the racial nor socioeconomic composition of a school significantly predict threat assessment rates. Concerningly, and in line with public media reports, research finds that the percentage of students with a disability is significantly positively associated with threat assessment rates. This disparity, and its implications for students with disabilities' experiences and outcomes, is an important issue for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to address; in light of the improvements in outcomes for racially and socioeconomically marginalized students, this brief endorses threat assessment with the caution that schools and districts must be particularly attuned to potential disparate impacts on students with disabilities and encourages policymakers to extend manifest determination protections for students with disabilities to the threat assessment process. Importantly, behavioral threat assessment scholars emphasize that threat assessment "is not a disciplinary process and is not used for the majority of students whose behavior results in OSS" (Cornell et al., 2025, p. 8).

COPAA. (2022). *K-12 threat assessment processes: Civil rights impacts*. Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates. Retrieved March 21, 2025, from https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.copaa.org/resource/resmgr/docs/2022_docs/k-12_threat_assessment_proce.pdf

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Studies have linked the structure and support elements of school climate to less bullying and victimization. Gerlinger and Wo tested the security measures versus school climate (authoritative school climate of high support and structure) debate and found that positive school climate was associated with less bullying whereas security measures had no to little association.

Following the Sandy Hook massacre, Connecticut invested in school-based health clinics and crisis intervention services rather than securitization policies. Investing in mental and behavioral health exemplifies a turn towards understanding behavioral and safety concerns not as issues of insufficient discipline or security, but unaddressed behavioral and mental health needs. The Affordable Care Act helped make this fiscally possible for schools and districts, as mental health services provided in schools were covered by expanded

behavioral health care coverage. Under the Biden administration, the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services has issued multiple guidances clarifying what behavioral health services are covered, how schools can recoup some administrative costs of providing behavioral and mental health care on-site, and how state education and Medicaid agencies can better coordinate.

Many districts allocated federal COVID relief dollars to hire staff and provide mental health supports to students, which is significant given that roughly 80 percent of youth mental healthcare occurs in school settings. Prioritizing mental health when allocating their ESSER and ARPA funds responds to known links between concerning behaviors, mental health, and changing patterns of technology use.

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Peetz, C. (2025, January 8). Is student behavior getting any better? What a new survey says. *Education Week*. Retrieved January 9, 2025, from https://www.edweek.org/leadership/is-student-behavior-getting-any-better-what-a-new-survey-says/2025/01

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Peetz, C. (2025, January 8). Is student behavior getting any better? What a new survey says. *Education Week*. Retrieved January 9, 2025, from https://www.edweek.org/leadership/is-student-behavior-getting-any-better-what-a-new-survey-says/2025/01

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Rios, O., Watts, M., & Woll, S. (2023). *Building a better behavior management strategy for students and teachers: Key findings from EAB’s student behavior survey* (38438). EAB. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from https://pages.eab.com/rs/732-GKV-655/images/EDIL-Student%20Behavior%20Executive%20Briefing-PDF.pdf

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than they were prior to the pandemic. Superintendents in districts where 75% or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch reported the highest overall levels of concern about student behavior. However, these superintendents also reported that *changes* in student behavior following the pandemic have not been as severe as they have been elsewhere.

Court, B., Rubenstein, G., & Schiemer, J. (2023). *2023 Voice of the superintendent: Key survey findings and crucial conversations for the year ahead*. EAB. Retrieved July 1, 2024, from https://pages.eab.com/rs/732-GKV-655/images/EAB%202023%20Voice%20of%20the%20Superintendent%20Survey%20Brief.pdf

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National Center for Education Statistics. (2022, July 6). *More than 80 percent of U.S. public schools report pandemic has negatively impacted student behavior and socio-emotional development*. National Center for Education Statistics Annual Report. Retrieved May 15, 2023, from https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp

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For classroom disruptions due to misconduct, four percent reported increases not due to COVID, 32 percent said disruptions remained the same, and five percent reported don't know/ does not occur. For non-abusive acts of disrespect directed towards teachers or staff, three percent said there were increases not due to COVID, 30 percent of principals reported that levels remained about the same as before COVID and 15 percent said they don't know or this doesn't occur. Six percent of principals reported increases in fights or physical attacks, but did not attribute the increase to COVID; 39 percent reported the behavior remained the same, eight percent reported there were decreases due/ not due to COVID (four percent each), and 15 percent said they didn't know or this behavior didn't occur. Fights/ physical attacks was the only behavior of these three for which responses reporting a decrease had standard errors below 30 and 50 percent; NCES reports all data, but encouraged caution when interpreting other behaviors..

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101 Students, families, and communities from marginalized backgrounds experienced disproportionate rates of death and hospitalization due to COVID-19, which both compounded and was compounded by existing pre-pandemic intersectional injustices and stressors in spheres ranging from job loss and economic security to criminal justice to mental health and wellbeing. In her speeches and writings, education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings refers to this confluence of crises as the "dual pandemic"—COVID-19 and racism—and the "four pandemics"—COVID-19, racism, climate change, and economic pressures. COVID-related changes in families' well-being—such as losing health insurance or childcare and becoming food insecure—aggravated existing disparities in students' well-being outside of school and deepened structural barriers to Black students' educational success. In-school challenges also ballooned, with 6.5 million more students chronically absent in 2021-2022 school year than in 2018-2019, a 91% increase. While public K-12 school enrollment fell by more than 1.2 million, over a third of this decline is not explained by increases in homeschooling, private school enrollment, or state-level migration, suggesting that rates of unregistered homeschooling and truancy have increased in the post-pandemic period.

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Naff, D., Williams, S., Furman-Darby, J., & Yeung, M. (2022, January 1). The mental health impacts of COVID-19 on PK–12 students: A systematic review of emerging literature. *AERA Open*, *8*, 23328584221084722. Retrieved August 17, 2024, from https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221084722

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106 School safety concerns also illustrate the intersection of concerns about mental health, social media, and

technology use with students' physical and psychological well-being. Despite widespread media and political attention on mental health supports following school shootings, research finds no direct link between psychopathology or mental health disorders and school shootings and/or mass shootings (though depression, suicidality, narcissism, and paranoia are common in the perpetrators). The National Association of School Psychologists advises educators on the threat social media poses to managing safety crises in schools, as social media can be used to disseminate rumors of threats to school campuses and/or false information in the wake of safety crises on school campuses. However, some argue that, particularly in Republican-controlled states and sessions of Congress, a focus on mental health is not a legitimate investment in whole-child services but rather a distraction from policy change on issues of gun access and gun control.

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Mair, A., Tiemtore, N., & Rusley, J. (2025). The impact of school resource officers on adolescent students' wellbeing and safety. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *76*(3), S47. Retrieved February 10, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2024.11.106

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Owens, E.G. (2017). Testing the school-to-prison pipeline. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *36*(1), 11–37. Retrieved June 24, 2024, from https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.21954

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Civil rights organizations fear that the current responses to school safety pose a serious threat to students of color and students with disabilities. Supporters of the Obama-era discipline guidance contend that the repeal of the civil rights protections expose Black students, who have not been the perpetrators of mass school shootings, to unintended consequences. Nationwide data from the 2021-22 CRDC highlighted that "Black students and Native American or Alaska Native students were 1.3 times more likely than White students to attend a school with a sworn law enforcement officer or security guard but no school counselor, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander students were 1.2 times more likely." The interactions between students and school police are context-dependent as school police take on multiple, often-conflicting, roles of "care, education and support, as well as punitive social control strategies." Black students articulate that while their relationships with school police often originate in a posture of care, those relationships are often then used to exert punitive control over the students themselves or others in their orbits. Perceptions of the various roles SROs and school police take on vary by educator and student race.

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Riser-Kositsky, M., Sawchuk, S., & Peele, H. (2021, June 4). School police: Which districts cut them? Which brought them back? *Education Week*. Retrieved August 4, 2024, from https://www.edweek.org/leadership/which-districts-have-cut-school-policing-programs/2021/06

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