

Keeping Students Safe and Supported: Research-Based Policy Recommendations for Executive and Legislative Officials in 2017

While our nation's public schools have substantially reduced overt violence over the last 20 years, increased awareness about school shootings, including the tragic attack on Sandy Hook Elementary School, has sharpened anxieties about student safety. To continue the nation's progress in creating safe schools, states and school districts need support to implement evidence-based approaches that address student needs.

State of the research

National data show that, between 1993 and 2013, there has been a [substantial decrease](#) in threats to students' physical safety in school, including reductions in rates of physical fights (from 16 percent to 8 percent) and weapons carrying (12 percent to 5 percent) among high school students. Furthermore, since the Centers for Disease Control began tracking school-associated violent deaths in 1992, such deaths have remained rare occurrences and there have been no consistent increases or decreases over time. Rather, annual figures range from a low of 33 in 2009 to a high of 63 in 2006. Between 2012 and 2013, for example, there were 53 such deaths, including 26 students and staff at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

As schools continue their efforts to improve student safety, particular issues merit close attention. In 2014, [rural students](#) faced higher rates of theft and violence at school (53 victimizations per 1000 students) than urban (32 victimizations) or suburban students (28 victimizations). Students also report [other experiences](#) that undermine their safety. While fewer students reported being [bullied](#) in 2013 (22 percent) than in 2007 (32 percent), rates of bullying remain high and relatively stable.



Schools need support to implement effective strategies to address these and other forms of misbehavior. Research makes clear that [suspensions do not prevent further disciplinary action](#); rather, they are associated with an increased risk of student [dropout and incarceration](#). The use of school-based policing is associated with an increased [risk of arrest](#) for minor offenses, without a decreased risk of [violent offenses](#). However, effective options such as [social and emotional learning](#) and [positive behavioral interventions and supports](#) can help schools intervene early with students who have the potential to disrupt school or threaten school safety, and help address any harms caused those students.

State of the field

Since 1999, federal discretionary funding to improve student safety has sought to address the underlying factors—students’ social and emotional development, and mental and behavioral health needs—influencing school security and school climates. In 1999, the U.S. Departments of Education (ED), Health and Human Services, and Justice launched [Safe Schools, Healthy Students](#) in the aftermath of a series of school shootings. A [national evaluation](#) found that these local grants were largely successful in reducing school violence. More recently, ED has supported State and local grants, under the [Safe and Supportive Schools](#) program and [School Climate Transformation Program](#) to help schools implement practices, frameworks, and programs that create supportive school climates and address students’ behavioral needs. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) prompts states to continue such efforts: under Sec. 1111 (g)(1)(C), states are required to address in their state plan how they will improve conditions for learning, reduce incidents of bullying and harassment and reduce the use of disciplinary practices that remove children from school or compromise student safety.

In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, federal and state officials sought increased funding for school-based policing to improve school safety. In 2013, DOJ awarded [\\$45 million in COPS Hiring Grants](#) to fund over 350 school resource officers. At the state level, [29 states introduced new legislation](#) regarding school-based police in 2013 alone, of which at least 17 were enacted. The [Congressional Research Service](#), however, found this strategy to be both cost prohibitive, as \$2.6 billion would be needed each year to maintain an officer in every school in the nation, and unsustainable, as the annual cost burden of even one officer (at \$30,000) would be too heavy for most local enforcement agencies. (By comparison, the annual per school cost to initiate [school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports](#) is significantly lower, at \$5,000 annually, and drops precipitously after the first two years of implementation.)

In addition to these efforts, federal officials worked to provide schools with new tools to safeguard students from active shooters. In 2013, the White House worked with a number of federal agencies to release a [guide](#) for developing high-quality emergency management plans.

For a list of sources used to develop this brief, go to <http://www.childtrends.org/research-based-policy-recommendations-2017/>

Our recommendations

We offer federal officials the following recommendations to continue the nation’s progress in promoting student safety on school grounds:

1. **Reinvigorate federal leadership and investment in promoting safe school climates that support student needs.** Specifically, the incoming administration should:

Offer new discretionary funding tailored to address the needs of rural and urban schools as distinct target audiences. Recent federal grant-making has focused on supporting the proper implementation of evidence-based practices, but without attention to how such funding streams might support the needs of both rural and urban populations. There have also been [concerns](#) that, in recent years, rural populations have received little direct benefit from federal discretionary grants due to smaller administrative budgets to support grant writing.

Carefully review states’ proposals to promote school climate under ESSA. To help states construct strong state plans, the Department should be proactive in helping identify states to build evidence-based strategies to support student needs. These efforts should build upon the support that the ED’s [National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments](#) has previously provided to states.

2. **Exercise caution when considering new federal investments to promote schools’ safety in the aftermath of school shootings.** While federal officials are likely to face pressure to improve student safety during such times, emphasis should be placed on cost-effective and sustainable approaches supported by research. This means that investments in highly visible, but high-cost security measures with poor evidentiary support (e.g., school-based policing) should receive careful scrutiny. Instead, priority should be placed on investments in preventive approaches (e.g., threat assessment), and in helping schools to implement and evaluate readiness initiatives (e.g., emergency management plans and active shooter drills).