



June 13, 2018

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor of Texas
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, Texas 78711-2428

Re: Guiding Principles for Schools to Improve School Safety

Dear Governor Abbott:

This letter represents the shared views of 10 statewide advocacy organizations that advocate for public policies to ensure all Texas youth are provided a quality education and a safe learning environment. Thank you for the attention and efforts that have been made following the tragedy in Santa Fe to identify how the state can better assist school districts and communities in keeping students in Texas safe. Like you, we are concerned about the safety of all students in our state. We are especially concerned about the health, safety, and education of students who belong to historically marginalized groups, such as students with disabilities, those living with mental health issues, and students of color. Many of these students are victims of violence, while also too often mischaracterized as being violent. We are concerned that some of the proposed policies to address school violence will cause further harm by inappropriately targeting students of color, with disabilities, and those with a mental health concern. This could lead to schools removing these groups of students at even higher rates from their classrooms and schools in the name of discipline.

As you continue to study and implement policy strategies to help schools and communities keep students safe, it is critical that you as a state leader protect the health, safety, and education of **all** Texas students. We respectfully submit the following considerations and guiding principles to assist in your decision making. These principles will help ensure state actions are effective in protecting all students while providing them the education they need to become healthy and successful adults. We look forward to collaborating with you and your offices to find the solutions that will bring the best outcomes for our students.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Responding effectively to an active crisis is necessary, but it is not enough. Schools and communities need a comprehensive and robust set of prevention, early intervention, and response strategies to keep students healthy and safe. Law enforcement, education, and public health experts all call on schools to use a range of strategies in order to be successful in reducing school violence:

- “The threat assessment process itself is unlikely to have a lasting effect on the problem of targeted school violence unless that process is implemented in the larger context of strategies to ensure that schools offer their students safe and secure learning environments.”¹ - The U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education
- “Broad prevention approaches that positively affect all youth, their relationships, and the environments in which they grow and learn are the most likely to be effective in eliminating youth violence and other adolescent health problems.”² - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

¹ Fein, R. A., et al., “A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates,” U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Dept. of Education, Washington, D.C., 2002, 1-95.

² David-Ferndon, C., et al., “A Comprehensive Technical Package for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Associated Risk Behaviors,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA, 2016, 1-64.

Youth violence can be prevented. Multiple risk and protective factors interact with one another to increase or reduce the likelihood that youth will become involved in violence. Risk factors include a lack of social problem solving skills, social isolation, or a history of witnessing or being victims of violence. Protective factors include having healthy coping and problem-solving skills, feeling connected to school, or feeling connected to at least one caring adult. Targeting known risk and protective factors using evidence-based prevention practices makes youth violence prevention possible.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends communities use multi-tiered prevention strategies throughout childhood as part of public efforts to reduce youth violence.³
- Key prevention strategies include building youth skills, teaching safe behavior, and implementing school-wide activities and policies to foster social connectedness and a supportive school climate. Positive school climate is linked to reductions in violence, bullying, and suicide.⁴
- Communities that prioritize prevention see greater reductions in youth violence compared to communities that only react to violence after it occurs.⁵

Some students are at higher risk of being affected by violence. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are twice as likely to experience abuse and bullying and four times more likely to be victims of crime.⁶ Students who receive special education (SPED) services and students with mental health concerns are more likely to be the victims of violence than they are to act out violently.^{7,8} They, along with students of color, are also disciplined and referred to the juvenile justice system at disproportionate rates as compared to their peers.^{9,10} Behaviors stemming from a disability or mental health concern can be viewed as threatening even when little or no risk is present. It is critical that any policy or practice protects these students from over-identification, and inappropriate removals from their classrooms, schools, and homes in a rush to “be safe.”

State leaders have a great challenge before them as the needs of our students can vary from county to county. The organizations below collaborated together to create a “guiding principles” document to reference when considering solutions to improve safety for all students in Texas. Please do not hesitate to contact the included person at each organization for more information.

We would appreciate your inclusion of these shared principles in your strategies to make schools safe and look forward to actively working with you on your initiative. Please contact us for further discussion, to provide additional information, or to otherwise provide support for this important work.

Sincerely,

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cc: Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, Speaker Joe Straus, Members of the Texas House of Representatives, Members of the Texas Senate

Enclosure: Improving Safety For All Texas Students: Guiding Principles

³ Ibid.

⁴ American Institutes for Research, “School Climate.” National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. 2018. Accessed June 13, 2018. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/safe-and-healthy-students/school-climate>.

⁵ David-Ferdon C, Simon TR. “Preventing Youth Violence: Opportunities for Action”. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014.

⁶ Margaret Charlton, et al., “Facts on Traumatic Stress and Children with Developmental Disabilities”. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/traumatic_stress_and_children_with_developmental_disabilities.pdf, 2004, 3-9

⁷ World Health Organization, “Violence against adults and children with disabilities” <http://www.who.int/disabilities/violence/en/>, accessed June 8, 2018.

⁸ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, “Mental Health Myths and Facts,” <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/mental-health-myths-facts>, 2017

⁹ Council of State Governments Justice Center & The Public Policy Research Institute, “Breaking Schools’ Rules: A Statewide Study on How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement”, Texas A&M University, 2011.

¹⁰ Deborah Fowler, et al., “Dangerous Discipline: How Texas Schools are Relying on Law Enforcement, Courts, and Juvenile Probation to Discipline Students” Texas Appleseed and Texans Care for Children, Austin, TX, 2016.

