Improving Safety For All Texas Students: Guiding Principles

All students deserve policy solutions that are based on research, are properly implemented, and demonstrate effectiveness. Texas students, families, and communities cannot afford for the state and districts to invest in school safety strategies that provide a false sense of security. State and district leaders should implement a continuum of effective prevention, intervention, and crisis response strategies that support the health, safety, and education of all students and reduce youth violence. Evidence-based threat assessments should be used and implemented properly in order to avoid the inappropriate and unwarranted identification or disciplining of students, to connect students with services and supports they may need, and to ensure student and school safety. Mental health services should result in improvements in students’ social-emotional wellness, behavior, and functioning. Data should be collected and shared publicly to assure parents, community members, and policymakers that school safety strategies are producing results that support the health, safety and education of all students.

All students deserve to be safe and supported in school. This includes students with disabilities, students with mental health concerns, students of color, and others who have been historically marginalized. Implemented policies should foster safe and supportive school climates for all students which will improve outcomes across a broad range of public safety, health, and education issues. School-wide programs, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative discipline, trauma-informed practices, and access to services and supports can help all students feel safe and supported at school and reduce the likelihood of school violence.

Youth at heightened risk for engaging in violence should be provided services and supports that mitigate or offset risks and build resiliency. Early identification and intervention strategies should target risk factors that are associated with violent behavior, such substance abuse, academic problems, association with deviant peers, and unstable or violent home environments. As such, rather than a behavior management approach, a range of overlapping strategies should be used to develop and build upon skills and strengths known to buffer youth from risk factors that may be present in their lives.

The use of discipline among students, without just or appropriate cause, must not be tolerated. The widespread use of zero-tolerance policies and use of police to address student misbehavior poses a particular risk for students of color and students whose disability may predispose them to engage in impulsive behavior or make inappropriate statements that are interpreted as threats. Even though studies show that Black and Latino youth do not misbehave in school at greater rates than White youth, research reveals students of color are disproportionately negatively impacted by exclusionary discipline and policing practices at school.

4 Deborah Fowler, et al., Texas Appleseed and Texans Care for Children, “Dangerous Discipline: How Texas Schools are Relying on Law Enforcement, Courts, and Juvenile Probation to Discipline Students” Austin,TX, 2016.
According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, disciplinary decisions for students receiving SPED services should balance the safety of the school with the educational rights of the student.\textsuperscript{5} School personnel and law enforcement should be made aware of behavior plans within the Individual Education Plan for students receiving special education services. Without training on how to interact with students with disabilities, school officials and police often misinterpret challenging behaviors as threats.

\textbf{All students with disabilities are entitled to receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive setting.} It is imperative that school safety policies and programs do not further isolate students with disabilities from their non-disabled peers. If effective threat assessments identify a student with a disability as presenting a credible threat, it is crucial that referral pathways are created for them to receive necessary services in the least restrictive setting that is safe and appropriate. Processes should be in place to ensure students continue to receive the educational services they are entitled to when they are placed outside of school and to help them transition back into their schools and classrooms as soon as it is safe and appropriate.

\textbf{Stigma that surrounds mental illness must not be perpetuated.} Public attention to mass shootings—often fueled by ill-informed and sensationalized media portrayals—overgeneralize ideas about the connections between mental illness and youth violence. These common misperceptions can be oversimplified and counterproductive.\textsuperscript{6} State leaders have the opportunity to clarify this misguided connection between mental illness and violence and build support for evidence-based policies both to improve mental health care and reduce gun violence. Evidence is clear that the vast majority of people with mental health conditions do not engage in violence against others, and violent behavior is often due to factors other than mental illness.\textsuperscript{7} Efforts to promote school safety should avoid perpetuating stigma and infringing on the rights and privacy of people with mental health conditions.

\textbf{Coordination, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement is necessary to prevent and address youth violence.} Youth violence is a complex and multifaceted issue, one that touches all communities in the forms of bullying, fighting, sexual violence, and suicide. Effective solutions require coordination and collaborations across agencies at the state and community levels. They also require meaningful engagement and input from advocates, parents, and students throughout Texas. The issues and solutions for each school are as diverse as our great state. Any plan or committee that is put forth to address school safety should have a feedback mechanism to discover issues not yet resolved.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5} 20 U.S.C. 1400, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act


\textsuperscript{7} Swanson, Jeffrey W., et al. "Mental Illness and Reduction of Gun Violence and Suicide: Bringing Epidemiologic Research to Policy." \textit{Annals of Epidemiology}, 2015}