



EQUITY-CENTERED ALTERNATIVES TO POLICING IN SCHOOLS: LESSONS FROM RESEARCH



As of **June 2021**, 38 school districts in 15 different states moved to end School Resource Officer (SRO) programs. What, though, are districts using as alternatives to SROs? An NEPC review of school district resolutions in 16 major districts across the U.S. offers some insight into what districts planned to do *instead* of relying on police in schools. Understanding these alternatives, and understanding the research about SROs and other safety options, provides some crucial evidentiary foundations for moving forward—particularly at a time when some school districts are backsliding on their reform initiatives.

Following the murder of George Floyd, Minneapolis was the first school district to end its SRO program, igniting a wave of similar reforms in other school districts. Each of the 16 school districts' resolutions that we reviewed mentioned shifting the focus from policing to using equity-centered alternatives to policing. These alternatives include the use of restorative practices, promoting racial equity in the classroom, and deeper community engagement and support. All 16 districts stated that they would implement schoolwide changes in approaching behavior, such as trauma-informed practices, social-emotional supports, or restorative practices.

8 of 16 Districts Planned to Use Restorative Practices

Eight out of the 16 districts mentioned restorative practices specifically. This approach has a solid research base. In one of the first randomized controlled trials of the effects of restor-

ative practices, RAND found that the program improved school climate (as rated by teachers), reduced overall suspension rates, and reduced discipline gaps by race and income. A recent NEPC policy brief on restorative justice in education (RJE) made clear that the way RJE is implemented has consequences related to program success. The brief recommends that schools “adopt principle-based, comprehensive, and equity-oriented RJE,” and “implement RJE with contextually sensitive, strategic, and long-term implementation plans and practices.”

10 of 16 Districts Affirmed Promoting Racial Equity in Classrooms

Ten districts mentioned changing policies to promote racial equity in classrooms, including providing specific anti-racist training to teachers and implementing culturally relevant curriculum. Organizations like Learning for Justice, Abolitionist Teaching Network, and Education for Liberation Network provide worthwhile professional development resources related to anti-racist teaching practices. A study that examined student perspectives found that the implementation of culturally relevant curriculum was associated with positive academic outcomes and strengthened racial-ethnic identity development, which is associated with student feelings of belonging. The Learning Policy Institute provides a helpful tool for districts aiming to advance racial equity on a systemic level.

10 of 16 Districts Planned to Invest More in Community Engagement and Support

Ten districts mentioned investing in community engagement and support, like using wrap-around services to support students at the community level, and engaging students and families in reimagining school safety. Research on community schools indicates that investing in integrated supports that address outside-of-school needs is associated with “significant improvements in attendance, behavior, social functioning, and academic achievement.” Additionally, engaging students and community members in the development of school safety policy gives them the opportunity to change in-school structures that promote oppression and replace those structures with systems that better support wellness. This policy memo provides insight about how schools can position families as leaders in transforming systems for equity.

Conclusion

School districts’ promising pursuit of evidenced-based alternatives to school-based law enforcement suggest the kinds of strategies that others can learn from. Such strategies will, however, require leadership and long-term commitment for the use of district and municipal funding to support sustainable implementation. During a time when some districts are reverting back to SROs as a quick-fix to respond to conflict and school violence, the research base remains as a touchstone and reminder of children’s needs. Evidence does not point to an association between the presence of SROs and reduced disciplinary incidents. There are a number of effective strategies available to reduce school violence that do not involve law enforcement. As the police-free schools movement moves forward, it will continue to be im-

portant for a civically engaged public to hold district and education officials accountable for promises to provide for student well-being and to address in-school contributors to student and staff conflict using evidenced-based strategies.

NEPC Resources on Discipline Policy

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