

Position Statement on Police in Schools

Mission

The California School-Based Health Alliance (CSHA) is the statewide organization working to put health care where kids are—in schools. Our mission is to promote the health and academic success of children and youth by increasing access to high quality health care and support services provided by school-based health centers (SBHCs). With the COVID-19 pandemic and the systemic racism faced by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), CSHA is committed to creating and maintaining resources and services that enable a safe and supportive environment in schools and communities. SBHCs and school health services play an important role in supporting positive school climates for all students, especially those that face the greatest health and education disparities.

Statement of Position

CSHA believes that schools can and should be safe, welcoming, and supportive environments for all students. CSHA supports advocacy efforts in California to eliminate police in schools. We also believe that school funds should go to student learning and health, and not police. To achieve this, we acknowledge that it may take school communities time to redefine school safety without relying on school police. This work does not happen overnight. However, important action is needed immediately to ensure schools are healthy and safe environments for all students.

Instead of increasing school safety, research shows that the presence of school police officers has a harmful effect on all students of color and particularly Black students. As an alternative to police, school investments should focus on practices and services that lead to positive outcomes for students. This includes promoting a positive school climate that protects every young person and their dignity, and provides opportunities for students to learn and grow. It also includes age-appropriate, non-punitive services that address some of the underlying causes of school discipline, such as fighting, truancy, substance use, or other misconduct. Strong evidence indicates that these non-punitive approaches are associated with high levels of academic achievement, healthy student development, and safe learning environments.

Rationale

Studies and reports are consistent in their findings that school police presence does not produce positive influences on students and their safety but instead further reinforces racial disparities, especially among Black students. The presence of police shifts the school environment from teaching and supporting students to criminalizing them.

There is no data that supports the idea that school police increase school safety. However, there is overwhelming evidence that suggests school police actually harm youth. The most available data draws conflicting conclusions about whether school resource officer (SRO) programs are effective at reducing school violence.¹ Experts who study violence in educational settings conclude that there is not any rigorous causal evidence that police reduce school shootings or school violence.² Instead, there is evidence that school police increase fear among students and have a disproportionate presence in schools with high percentages of students of color, further exacerbating educational disparities in our schools.

Many Black students report feeling less safe in schools with police presence. Black youth disproportionately experience police violence, in schools and in their communities. When exposed to such frequent violence from an early age, through in-person or media displays of police brutality and racial profiling, Black youth can experience varying levels of stress when they are exposed to police violence. Youth bring these experiences with them to school. The California Healthy Kids Survey indicates that when compared to their White peers, students of color, especially Black students, had less positive perceptions of police in both their community and their school. The data also suggests that the presence of police in school was less likely to make students of color, particularly Black students, feel safe at school.³ Fear causes an increase in the stress hormone cortisol, and high levels of cortisol interfere with learning and memory.

Over the past four decades, there has been an increase of law enforcement in schools. Only 1% percent of schools had security staff in the mid-1970s. By 2017-18, the proportion of public schools in the U.S. with school security staff was 61.4%, with even higher rates for large schools and higher minority-enrollment schools. In middle and high schools where more than 75 percent of enrolled students were Black, 67.4% had one or more school-based law enforcement or security officer on campus.⁴

In contrast to the growing presence of law enforcement in schools, there is an insufficient number of mental health staff and support available to students.

Research has shown that the presence of school-based mental health providers can result in positive outcomes for students and improve school safety. Only 3% of schools in California have a school-based health center (SBHC) and, nationally, 14 million students are in schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker. Furthermore, 90% of students are in public schools that do not meet the recommended ratios of school-based mental health staff to students.⁵

More police presence in schools is associated with more student arrests and more lost learning time due to suspensions. And school arrests and suspensions are disproportionately impacting Black students.

Looking at California data spanning more than seven years, high schools with higher security staff-to-student ratios have higher rates of lost instruction due to suspensions, especially for Black students.⁶ Separate reports looking at two school districts, Oakland Unified and Los Angeles Unified, found significant disparities in school arrests. In Oakland, while Black youth made up only 30.5% of the district's student population, they made up 73% of Oakland School Police Department's arrests.⁷ In Los Angeles Unified, Black students made up 25% of the total arrests, citations, and diversions despite representing less than 9% of the student population.⁸

Students' increased interactions with school police increases their involvement with law enforcement and the justice system, and disproportionately puts students of color on a pathway from school to prison.

Research shows that when students are suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation, they are nearly three times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year.⁹ The regular presence of a police officer in a school can also significantly increase the likelihood that a student will be referred to outside law enforcement for even minor misbehavior.¹⁰

School policing is intrinsically tied to the institution of law enforcement, which has disproportionately harmed and not protected communities of color.

Systemic racism, specifically expressed through law enforcement, detrimentally impacts the health and wellbeing of children and their families.¹¹ Whether they are themselves victims or witnesses to it, children can experience varying levels of stress when they are exposed to police violence. Several studies have shown that encounters with police can lead to other adverse physical, emotional, and mental health issues including chronic stress and chronic disease. Even with training on how to interact safely with students, school police are part of a system that disproportionately harms students and communities of color.

Recommendations for Creating Safe Schools without Relying on School Police

To ensure the health and well-being of children and youth, we recommend that schools direct funding toward services and resources that benefit students and strengthen their communities. These changes do not occur overnight but CSHA believes these recommendations may help schools in their long-term strategy to redefine school safety without relying on school police. The following recommendations are not exhaustive nor are they mutually exclusive.

Strategies for Prevention

- Invest in school-based, community mental health services and support. Prioritize school-based and community-based programs that include mental health intervention and violence prevention, particularly in communities most affected by law enforcement violence. Include ACEs screenings, screening and brief interventions for substance use, and trauma-informed approaches.
 - [School Discipline & Student Substance Use: A guide for school-based health providers](#) (California School-Based Health Alliance) - provides strategies for implementing non-punitive approaches to student substance use.
 - [Practices to Increase Healing & Trauma-Informed Services at School-Based Health Centers](#) (California School-Based Health Alliance)
- Support community efforts to improve educational and career outcomes in youth. Partner with community organizations that provide access to services where students can increase student attendance and achievement through tutoring, college preparation, job training and placement, and arts and recreation. Consider adult and peer mentorship programs that enable students to connect with their communities and schools while feeling empowered in their own capacity to succeed academically, socially, and professionally.
- Implement classroom and school-wide practices such as School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to improve school climate and student well-being. Teaching students how to identify and manage their emotional responses improves student behavior and school climate.

More Resources:

- [Center on PBIS](#)
- [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#)
- [Partnership for Children and Youth - Resources for Social Emotional Learning](#)

- Train school staff on de-escalation strategies, implicit bias, and conflict resolution. Prepare school staff to implement discipline policies that provide positive, restorative resolutions to student misbehavior. It is important to address the behavior rather than label the student. Many trauma-informed trainings and curriculums include de-escalation approaches to student behavior.

More Resources:

- [Using Trauma Informed Strategies to De-Escalate Classroom Conflict](#) (ppt)
- [UCSF Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools \(HEARTS\)](#)

Strategies for Alternative Responses

- Implement a Restorative Justice (RJ) framework and practices that shift from punitive forms of discipline to alternative holistic approaches that reduce exclusionary discipline. An RJ framework ensures that practices, policies, and approaches are baked into the whole school environment, not just satellite interventions available to a select group of students. Restorative Justice in schools transforms the mindset from “rule-based institutions to relationship-based communities” that restores dignity and repairs harm for students and staff.¹²

More resources:

- [Restorative Justice in Action](#) (Alameda County Center for Healthy Schools and Communities)
 - [International Institute of Restorative Practices](#)
 - [Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth](#)
- Provide Community Intervention Workers and Peace-Builders trained to work in schools, around schools, and/or in the larger community to address safety concerns and conflict. Their role is to decrease violence and increase safety that is not reliant on police. They can also provide safe passage to and from schools.

More resources:

- [Los Angeles Intervention Coalition](#) - comprises of 15 gang intervention agencies and groups advocating to expand peacemakers to improve safety, community wellbeing, and trust within communities of color
- [Boston Center for Youth and Families \(BCYF\): Streetworker Program](#) - streetworkers help to prevent youth violence by de-escalating and mediating conflicts between neighborhoods in Boston
- [Building a Positive Future for LA's Youth Report](#) - calls for investment in youth development infrastructure as an alternative approach to community health and public safety

- Establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that limits the role of law enforcement in school-based incidents should any serious incidents take place that require calling the police. An MOU is a formalized agreement between the school district and the local police department that restricts what police can and cannot do when entering a school building.
 - [Sample MOU Agreements Between Police and Schools](#) (Advancement Project)
- Review and change school discipline policies to limit interactions with any police. Many current school policies respond to student behavior (i.e. substance use/possession, fighting) by engaging school police. Schools should review these policies and include strategies that limit the reliance on police officers, restrict what police can do when entering a school building (see above), and alternatively engage school- and community-based support services.

Additional Resources

- [Advancement Project and Alliance for Educational Justice](#)
- Dignity in Schools Campaign
 - Model Codes on [Education](#) and [Dignity](#)
 - [Dignity in Schools Campaign California](#)
 - On-Demand Webinar: [“Getting to the Removal of Police in Schools”](#)
- [Fix School Discipline](#)
 - Toolkits for [educators](#) and [community members](#)
- [The People’s Plan for Police Free Schools](#), Black Organizing Project
- [Police in School: Re-imagining School Safety - A Literature Review on School Safety](#), Center for Healthy Schools and Communities, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency
- [Health and Cultural Wealth: Student Perspectives on Police-Free Schools in Fresno, California](#), Human Impact Partners and Fresno Barrios Unidos
- [The Harms of Structural Whiteness on Weapon Carrying, Policing, and Child Health](#) by Rhea W. Boyd, in *Pediatrics* July 2021, 148 (1)

¹ Congressional Research Service. (2018, July 5). School Resource Officers: Issues for Congress. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45251>

² Yablon, A. (2019, April 6). Do armed guards prevent school shootings? The Trace. <https://www.thetrace.org/2019/04/guns-armed-guards-school-shootings/>

³ Nakamoto, J., Cerna, R., & Stern, A. (2019). High school students' perceptions of police vary by student race and ethnicity: New research findings. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/resource-high-school-students-perceptions-of-police.pdf>

⁴ Education Civil Rights Alliance, & the American Federation of Teachers. (2020, August). Police in schools. <https://edrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PoliceInSchools-by-ECRA-and-AFT.pdf>

⁵ American Civil Liberties Union. (2019). Cops and no counselors: How the lack of school mental health staff is harming students. <https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>

⁶ Losen, D.J., & Martinez, P. (2020, June 21). Is California doing enough to close the school discipline gap? Civil Rights Project, UCLA. <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/school-discipline/is-california-doing-enough-to-close-the-school-discipline-gap>

⁷ Black Organizing Project, Public Counsel, & the ACLU of Northern California (2013 August). The impact of policing Oakland youth. <http://www.publiccounsel.org/tools/assets/files/0436.pdf>

⁸ Allen, T., Bryan, I., Guerrero, A., Teng, A., & Lytle-Hernandez, K. (2018). Policing our students: An analysis of L.A. school police department data (2014-2017). The Million Dollar Hoods Project. <http://milliondollarhoods.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Policing-Our-Students-MDH-Report-Final.pdf>

⁹ Council of State Governments Justice Center, & Public Policy Research Institute. (2011, July). Breaking schools' rules: A statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement. Fix School Discipline. http://www.fixschooldiscipline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/1.Breaking_School_Rules_-_StatewideStudy_HowSchoolDiscipline_Relates_StudentSuccess_JuvenileInvolve.pdf

¹⁰ Nance, J.P. (2016). Students, police, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Washington University Law Review. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2577333

¹¹ The Children's Partnership. (2020 November). Policing and its harmful impacts on child wellbeing. <https://childrenspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/TCP-Policing-Child-Health-FINAL.pdf>

¹² Gregory, A., & Evans, K.R. (2020 January). The starts and stumbles of restorative justice in education: Where do we go from here? National Education Policy Center. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/restorative-justice>