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# 3 KEY QUESTIONS FOR RETHINKING STUDENT SAFETY INVESTMENTS

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*An ERS Emerging Insights Brief*



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### Introduction

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We all want our schools to be safe, inviting and positive places for all students. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case. We are grappling with a history of systemic racism and police brutality against Black Americans in our country—a national reckoning that is playing out in our schools, too. As the research base grows on the negative impacts of over-policing in schools, particularly for Black students, there is mounting pressure for districts to cut ties with police departments in favor of other investments to create the safe, welcoming, and supportive school climates that we want for all students.

Here at ERS, we are not school climate experts. We are resource-use experts, but we wondered whether our experience in helping districts navigate tough resource allocation decisions might be a helpful entry-point to this discussion. When district partners are trying to make difficult resource-use decisions, we always pose a version of the following three questions, regardless of whether we're talking about an instructional investment or an operational one:

1. **Vision:** What do we believe needs to be true of our schools in order to provide a safe and welcoming environment for all students?
2. **Resource Use:** In what ways does our current safety spending and organization support or hinder this vision? How does spending differ across schools based on needs and context? How are students of color, particularly Black students, affected by our practices?
3. **Aligning Resources to Vision:** What resource shifts must we make to better align our investments with our vision for safe and welcoming schools? To foster safe school climates, which types of alternative investments are better aligned with research and with our district vision?

This moment provides a critical inflection point for districts to revisit their student safety investments. First, with the ongoing global pandemic, very few students are attending school in-person full-time. On its own, this change warrants rethinking the size and nature of any investments focused primarily on ensuring the physical safety of students. But reevaluating these often sizable investments in physical safety is even more critical right now, since we also know that the need for student supports in the areas of social, emotional, and psychological safety are



greater than any period in recent memory. State revenue forecasts also suggest that upcoming budget cycles will be challenging, even with additional federal stimulus funding. This means that every dollar must be invested strategically.

This “emerging insights” brief aims to support districts in engaging with these questions, naming some of the common challenges and opportunities, to ultimately help align resource use to vision. We explore each of these key questions in more detail, sharing observations from more than 15 years of experience helping school systems transform how they use their resources to better support students, as well as learnings from existing research in the field, initial conversations with district leaders, and insights from our comparative financial database of over 25 districts.

## Part 1: Clarifying Our Vision for Student Safety

**Vision:** What do we believe needs to be true of our schools in order to provide a safe and welcoming environment for all students?

When thinking about the role of school police and other student safety-related investments, it may be helpful to contextualize these investments within a broader vision of the kind of student experience we want to foster in our schools. Through the Alliance for Resource Equity—our partnership with the Education Trust—we have identified 10 dimensions of education resource equity that can unlock better experiences for all students in school, drawing on both research and the lived experiences of students, parents, and educators from across the country. As part of this work, we’ve come to view student safety as just one aspect of what is needed to create a “Positive & Inviting Climate” for all students:

### **Positive & Inviting Climate: The Vision**

*Each student—including students with higher needs and students of color—experiences a physically safe and emotionally supportive environment at school, including fair and consistent rules and discipline policies, positive relationships with staff and students that foster belonging, effective social-emotional learning opportunities, and meaningful family engagement that meets students’ needs, so all students can reach high standards and thrive.*

### [\(The Education Combination\)](#)

Each of these four components—physically safe and emotionally supportive schools, positive relationships, access to effective social-emotional learning opportunities, and meaningful family engagement—must work together in order to create an environment that is truly inviting, welcoming, and supportive for all students. Research supports the importance of taking this kind of holistic approach; for example, we know that students perform better when they feel a sense of belonging (CORNELL & MAYER, 2010 and KORPERSHOEK ET AL, 2019); teachers are more likely



to stay in schools with positive and safe climates (SIMON & JOHNSON, 2015); and students perform better when their families are thoughtfully engaged (MCNEAL JR., 2001).

Today, there is growing concern about the heavy reliance on school police (also known as School Resource Officers or SROs) to operationalize physical safety in school buildings. For example, research suggests that SROs are more likely than school administrators to take harsher disciplinary approaches to student behavior, which increases the number of offenses referred to law enforcement (NANCE, 2016) and risks undermining a positive school climate (GOTTFREDSON ET AL, 2020). Indeed, students in schools with SROs are more likely to be subject to exclusionary disciplinary practices (FISHER & HENNESSY, 2016). Research also shows limited evidence of SROs improving physical safety in schools (WEILER & CRAY, 2011). Police in schools are also typically focused solely on ensuring building security and are rarely tasked with supporting the other important aspects of school climate.

There are also significant concerns around the consequences of police presence in schools for students of color, particularly Black students. Increased referrals to law enforcement and more prevalent exclusionary discipline practices likely exacerbate the criminalization of Black students and students with disabilities, who are already disproportionately restrained, secluded, suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement or arrested (USDOE OCR, 2016). Black boys with disabilities, for example, have a five-times higher likelihood of being arrested than students overall, while Black girls are 3.5 times more likely than white girls to be arrested (WHITAKER ET AL, 2019). And studies suggest this is not a result of differences in behavior—a 2014 study found that Black students are punished more severely than white students for the same behavior (FINN & SERVOSS, 2014). These concerns call into question whether the current practice of investing in school policing as the predominant way of providing physical security is creating positive and inviting school climates for all students.

As districts and communities\* wrestle with what to do about their student safety investments, the first step is to clearly define a comprehensive vision for what student safety means in their system. Ideally, the vision is centered on building a supportive school climate, disciplining with a restorative goal, and attending to students' social, emotional, and psychological needs, as well as ensuring their physical safety and well-being. Resource use decisions should then be aligned to this holistic vision. In doing so, districts and communities may find that it makes sense to shift investments away from school policing and programs focused solely on a narrow definition of physical safety, and instead, reallocate resources across a variety of investments that support a more comprehensive vision of safety for all students.

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*\*Note: We include communities, and not just districts, as actors to acknowledge the importance of the involvement of the broader community in decisions about investments in student safety, and because district leadership teams often cannot make these decisions on their own.*



## Part 2: Assessing Current Resource Allocations

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**Resource Use:** In what ways do our current safety investments support or hinder this vision? How are students of color, particularly Black students, affected by our practices?

In order to inform our analysis, we reviewed our financial comparison database of 26 districts and conducted interviews with several district leaders including Chiefs of School Safety, Directors of Student Support Services, and Chief Financial Officers. In the process, we identified two major challenges to creating useful data: Districts don't consistently capture school security investments and they don't track them to the school level, making it impossible to assess the size or impact of this spending.

### Challenge #1: District budgets don't capture the full extent of school security investments due to shared costs with counties and local municipalities.

Based on the 26 districts in our financial comparison database where we had information on school security spending, we see that investments in this area typically fall into three subcategories:

- **School Police** in the form of School Resource Officers (SROs)—sworn law-enforcement officers who are typically armed, with the right to arrest—assigned to patrol specific schools or groups of schools.
- **Other Security Personnel** such as Security Guards, Campus Monitors, and School Sentries who often play a similar role to SROs, but without the formal law-enforcement ties and accreditations.
- **School Security Equipment** like visitor access systems, metal detectors, and surveillance camera networks.

Across the 26 districts, total spending on school security ranged from \$47 per pupil to \$533 per pupil—a significant variation, which called into question the completeness of our dataset. We soon discovered that the core issue is that districts often do not pay for all their school security resources, because costs are shared with the county or local municipality. For example, we could not identify any budget or expenditure lines related to SROs in 11 of our 26 districts, even though a cursory online search of the district websites indicated school police presence in all 11 districts. Even among the 15 districts where we were able to identify spending on SROs, the wide range in school policing spend (\$3 per pupil to \$206 per pupil) led us to believe that most of the SRO costs in those districts were not paid for by the district directly, thereby making any attempts at comparing spend across districts fruitless.



Our district leader interviews confirmed this hypothesis: In some districts, all school policing was funded and operated through a partnership with the local police departments, while other districts have established their own school police departments but receive external funding to operate them. One district leader shared that the district only pays for 50% of SROs' salaries, while the remaining 50% was covered by the local police department.

This lack of transparency is particularly concerning given the prevalence of SROs in schools today. The presence of SROs increased significantly in the 1990s after several high-profile school shootings, due to support from federal and state programs. For example, the Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) office expanded its grant program in 1998 to include funding for schools, and by 2013, had "invested more than \$720 million in school-based hiring programs for law enforcement, provided funding for more than 6,300 schools resource officers and distributed over \$111 million to approximately 5,500 schools to help enhance student safety through the installation of new security equipment" (USDOJ, 2013). In response to the Parkland, FL shooting in 2018, Congress passed the STOP School Violence Act to provide \$75 million annually until 2028 to expand policing activities and surveillance. Also in the year after Parkland, at least 26 states dedicated at least a further \$900 million to school security efforts (PHENICIE, 2018).

## **Challenge #2: Unlike other school-based resources, school security staff and spending are rarely associated with individual schools, making it difficult to track the impact of investments on students.**

While school security investments play out in schools, they are rarely allocated to individual schools. Instead, investments are typically budgeted and managed by a central school security (or police) department. But, our interviews with district leaders show that most school security personnel, including SROs, are assigned to patrol a specific school or cluster of schools. However, unlike other school-based staff (teachers, counselors, librarians, custodians, etc.), school security personnel often do not appear on school staff rosters or on school budgets. For example, in our financial comparison database (which per our point above, admittedly, has incomplete school security investment information), only five of 15 districts tagged SROs to specific schools.

Additionally, unlike other school-based staff, districts rarely report publicly on allocation of school security personnel to individual schools. For example, in the 15 districts where we could identify budget or expenditure lines related to SROs, only one publicly reported those expenses on their website (both FTE and dollar amounts) at the school-level. While the recent USDOE Civil Rights Data Collection has improved transparency to some extent, since it discloses the number of school police, security guards, nurses, and other positions by school, major limitations persist. For instance, the expenditures associated with these FTEs are not available, and there is a significant lag time between data collection and data release.



This lack of transparency in school-level security spending makes it difficult for districts and other stakeholders to easily assess whether current resource use practices are achieving desired experiences and outcomes for students.

This isn't to say that districts aren't already collecting and analyzing lots of school security-related data. We know from our interviews that districts track behavioral issues, disciplinary referrals, and use of force incidents, as well as conducting parent and student surveys on perceptions of student safety and school climate. But if districts were able to connect these metrics to their school-level investments in safety and security, they could better answer critical equity questions such as: Are schools with higher proportions of Black students more likely to have a higher SRO-to-student ratio? Does increased spending on school security correlate with increased perception and experience of student safety? How do these trends differ across student subgroups?

Given the lack of evidence in the field that suggests school policing improves student safety, and the known concerns around the consequences of police presence in schools for students of color, particularly Black students, it's imperative that districts track their school security investments at the school-level. Only then can districts, and their communities, regularly and easily assess the relationship between school policing and student safety, and the subsequent impact on students' experiences of their school environment.

### Part 3: Aligning Resources to Vision

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**Alignment:** What resource shifts must we make to better align our investments with our vision for safe and welcoming schools? To foster safe school climates, which types of alternative investments are better aligned with research and with our district vision?

From our work with other on other issues, we know that every district is different, and that what works best to support student well-being in one context might not be the best choice in another. At the same time, our experience, research and interviews with district leaders from across the country indicate that there are a few things that districts can do to transform resource use, policies, and practices to create a positive and inviting climate for all students. We will also spotlight promising examples we have encountered in our research. No example is perfect, but we think it's helpful to get inspiration from promising practices.

**1. As detailed above, districts must define a comprehensive vision for student safety that includes social, emotional, psychological, and physical safety.**

The place to start, as emphasized above, for districts and communities seeking to reimagine their approach to student safety, is to articulate a holistic vision of student safety, which brings



together social, emotional, psychological, and physical components of safety. Development, implementation and accountability related to this vision should be driven by a joint effort across stakeholders including Departments of Safety, Student Supports, Equity, and Academics, as well as students and communities of the system.

**District Spotlight\*:** For School District U-46, northwest of Chicago, keeping its 38,000 students safe means ensuring that the school climate invites student learning and growth. U-46's School Safety and Culture Department defines its vision as follows:

"A safe school is a place where learning can occur in a welcoming environment free of intimidation, violence, and fear. School District U-46 is dedicated to providing a safe environment for children so they can focus on learning and growing."

## 2. Redesign organizational structures to promote cross-departmental collaboration in support of this holistic vision of school safety.

When examining question of strategic resource use, it's critical to ask how the dollars translated into organizational structures aligned to meet clear goals. Keeping students safe is a complicated and multifaceted effort. It's hard work that requires a wide array of expertise, and rarely is a single office or department responsible for ensuring student safety. Instead, the work of creating a positive and inviting climate for students typically spans across several departments within the district, plus more organizations across a community, with each district department focused on optimizing their area of safety.

For example, in a typical district, the school security team, which tends to be responsible for the security of property and the physical safety of students, sits within the Operations Department. This office tends to be separate from the teams that oversee counselors, social workers, and psychologists, who work to ensure the emotional and psychological safety of students, who are, in turn, separate from the teams who oversee disciplinary practices, even though both teams often sit within the same Student Supports Department. And then there are the teams within Academics responsible for the development of social-emotional learning opportunities, as well as those within Community Engagement responsible for meaningful family engagement. All these arms must come together to support schools in creating a true sense of safety for students, but fragmented responsibility makes it difficult.

Differences in perspectives among district leaders may further complicate collaboration between the various district offices. For example, school safety officers, and particularly those responsible for the school police departments, are often led by professionals with primarily law enforcement backgrounds and expertise (14 of the 15 districts we studied had school security offices led by former police officers). Meanwhile, district leaders overseeing student support services or school mental health programs tend to have more familiarity and experience with the roles of restorative justice, mental health programs, and family engagement. Without active efforts to





promote cross-departmental collaboration, these differences in background and approach can lead to fragmentation.

Within central offices, creating coherence might mean shifting organizational structures to facilitate shared leadership on issues of school safety. Cross-department reporting structures could also be set up to prevent silos. Direct links between relevant departments including offices of safety, student mental health, student supports, and equity, and the use of integrated student safety plans and regular meetings across relevant district leaders that review safety and climate outcomes would help to promote collaboration. The same level of collaboration should be the goal in schools between professionals who share the goal of keeping students safe.

**District Spotlight:** In Denver Public Schools, cross-departmental collaboration is a key priority. We learned from the Chief of Safety that he has monthly meetings with district leaders overseeing student support services, and his office co-develops district student safety policy with the school mental health teams. In schools, SROs also join school leadership team meetings to maintain close working relationships with school administrators, mental health professionals and other student support staff.

### 3. Provide transparency around total and school-level safety investments.

As detailed above, we have struggled to get a full picture of the total safety and security footprint. To that end, we encourage districts to find ways to provide complete information on their student safety spending. This starts with documenting all safety and policing resources, regardless of whether it's paid for by the district or funded by municipalities and counties, on publicly accessible school budgets. We also think it's crucial that investments be disaggregated at the school-level, to provide transparency into how resources are deployed across different school contexts and student demographics.

**District Spotlight\*:** The School District of Philadelphia publishes its annual school budgets with a position summary of school purchases, which indicates the number and location of all school-based staff including school police officers. Each year's budget also shows the change in FTE relative to the previous school year. This level of transparency is needed for any interested stakeholder to be able to analyze where and how much security personnel is being deployed across a district.

### 4. Consider investments in research-based practices to promote safe and welcoming schools

A growing body of literature suggests that school-based mental health professionals, social-emotional learning programs, and restorative disciplinary policies lead to positive changes in student behavior and well-being (e.g., DURLAK ET AL, 2011, NOCERA ET AL, 2014, WAASDORP ET AL, 2012). These investments and practices reduce behavioral referrals, minimize violence, and strengthen relationships between students and teachers, which all contribute to a positive and safe school environment (FRONIUS ET AL, 2019).

While research explicitly linking these practices to other aspects of school safety is limited, we heard from every district leader we spoke with that growing their district capabilities and



offerings in these areas is a top priority. For instance, one leader told us that they were able to use federal grant dollars to hire external support to train staff on restorative practices, seeing improvement in staff satisfaction as well as student behavioral outcomes.

**District Spotlight\*:** Oakland Unified School District runs a Restorative Justice office and program, which brings restorative practices to complement existing school initiatives. According to the district’s Restorative Justice office, RJ “creates a positive, inclusive school culture; enhances teaching and learning; and acts as a preventative measure, as school communities are better equipped to resolve conflicts as they appear, before they escalate into a bigger issue.”

(Learn more: [Oakland Unified School District restorative justice implementation guide](#))

## 5. Track the impact of student safety investments on student wellness, especially for students of color and Black students.

Measuring the success of any large-scale educational programs is challenging. It is especially tricky when solving for something as nebulous as “student safety.” Still, given the infinite ways resources could be deployed towards the goal of keeping schools safe, it’s important to deliberately track the results of each dollar spent just as we would approach any other investment in a complex area, too—from curriculum to professional development to student enrichment. In an ideal world, we want investments in school safety to positively impact all measures of a positive and inviting school climate.

While we know that districts do track indicators like crime and arrest statistics, consistent with a focus on reducing violence and criminal activity in and around schools, districts can go one step further by tracking the impact of all safety-related initiatives and investments to assess the impact on students. By analyzing a combination of quantitative metrics and qualitative surveys about student and family perceptions of safety and security, districts can answer questions like: How is our restorative justice program impacting students’ sense of belonging? How do perceptions of student safety and school security programs differ across schools? And how do all these results differ by student racial and socioeconomic background?

**Recommended Approach:** In our work at ERS, we routinely work with our district partners to think through the ROI of complex investment decisions. Our System-Strategy ROI approach starts by defining the fundamental student-need to be addressed and asks not “Which program is better?” but “What resources will meet this need?”. We have outlined a five-step approach to ROI evaluation, which we recommend as a starting point for tracking the return on student safety investments. You can learn more in our System-Strategy ROI guide. to health, family, or other factors, some teachers may be unable to work in the school building – but in an in-person or hybrid model, some of their students will attend school in-person. Below we explore potential staffing solutions that districts can employ to support both teachers and students.

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*\*Note: We did not interview leaders from these districts for this “emerging insights” piece. These district spotlights were recommended to us by experts in the field as well as our own search for exemplars.*



## Where to go from here...

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This “emerging insights” piece represents early exploration of this issue. We wanted to share it because we hope that in this moment of renewed public reckoning with America’s ongoing struggle with systemic racism and police brutality against Black Americans that we might have unique data or approaches to bring to bear. We hope that others might build on it or [connect with us](#) to correct or inform our thinking. We are committed to building our own capacity in this area and learning more about the different ways that districts invest in student safety.



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