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SYNTHESIZING KNOWLEDGE ON EQUITY AND EQUITY-BASED SCHOOL SAFETY STRATEGIES

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Message From the Director

For the past several years, NIJ has focused on improving knowledge and understanding on how to increase the safety of our nation's K-12 schools. In 2014, NIJ began the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative specifically to develop knowledge about the root causes of school violence, develop strategies for increasing school safety, and rigorously evaluate innovative school safety strategies through pilot programs. Today, NIJ continues to invest in research and evaluation efforts to improve K-12 school safety.

Since 2014, NIJ has invested over $200 million and funded over 100 school safety projects covering a wide variety of topics. We have learned a great deal from these individual projects. Now, to help facilitate the use of this information, it is important to synthesize findings across multiple studies addressing similar questions.

In response to the 2021 Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, NIJ funded this paper to synthesize knowledge on equity and equity-based school safety strategies. In schools, equity concerns arise in a number of areas, including disciplinary responses and how students are protected from school violence.

Here, the authors offer their perspectives on what we know about racial and ethnic equity issues in schools and how to effectively incorporate racial and ethnic equity approaches into a comprehensive school safety strategy. Further, the authors offer several recommendations for how they think we can create school environments that are inclusive and equitable. Among these recommendations are calls for various policies to promote equity and for additional research and evaluation on policies and practices to reduce disparities in discipline.

It is clear we still have work to do to understand what works to create safe, equitable school environments and consider how to implement evidence-based policies and practices into a comprehensive school safety strategy. Where we do have a solid base of knowledge, we recognize that schools may face significant barriers in creating equitable, safe environments. It will take engagement and coordination from key stakeholders, including educators, researchers, law enforcement, parents, students, and others.

NIJ remains steadfast in its commitment to producing science to help stakeholders keep schools safe for *all* students. I hope this paper helps those focused on this important issue to consider next steps to take to fill knowledge gaps and incorporate into practice what we know thus far about producing safe and equitable school environments.

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Executive Summary

This white paper provides an overview of the literature on school safety in the United States, with a focus on equity. Using the framework developed by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), this paper situates a comprehensive school safety approach as a balance of three key elements: physical safety, school climate, and student behavior, with an emphasis on equity and the inclusion of knowledge gained from projects funded by the NIJ Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI; National Institute of Justice 2020). The recent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the national outcry to address systemic racism have highlighted the continuing inequities that make schools unsafe for marginalized students. Systems must consider the experiences of these students and be intentional about implementing policies that balance the elements of a comprehensive school safety framework while also explicitly considering equity. For the purposes of this discussion, equity in school safety is defined as a system that not only considers but respects the varied and intersectional individual identities that students possess to ensure that they do not hinder their ability to feel safe at school and receive a fair education. The scope of this discussion will focus on the need for equity specifically relating to racial and ethnic identities.

School violence is prevalent and includes interpersonal aggression such as bullying, sexual violence, fighting, and gun violence. In 2019, students ages 12-18 reported experiencing 764,600 criminal victimizations at school and 509,300 criminal victimizations away from school, and about 5% of students ages 12-18 reported that they had been afraid of an attack or harm at school (Irwin et al. 2021). Various school safety policies have been implemented in response to these forms of violence. From 2009 to 2019, the percentage of students ages 12-18 who reported their school used one or more security cameras increased from 70% to 86%, and the percentage of students who reported observing the presence of security guards or police officers increased from 68% to 75% (Irwin et al. 2021). Currently in the United States, there is an overreliance on punitive and exclusionary school discipline measures (e.g., zero-tolerance policies) that harm and over-criminalize student behavior, particularly the actions of students with marginalized racial and ethnic identities. Much of the existing research on school safety focuses on the ineffectiveness of current practices, particularly as they relate to equity. Fewer scholars have had the opportunity to address the implementation of school safety policies that have a specific focus on creating a safe and equitable environment for all students. Although school safety is a complex topic and there is no single approach to address it, this review will summarize current research on established policies as well as present recommendations for equity in school safety. Several main points from this review are summarized below.

Key Takeaways

- Current school disciplinary policies are largely punitive and exclusionary, such as zero tolerance. These approaches are not effective for ensuring school safety and over-criminalize students of color.

- Existing safety strategies do not center equity; however, there are several promising approaches (restorative practices, threat assessments, and positive student-teacher relationships) that can replace zero tolerance.

- School safety programming must be implemented systematically with buy-in from a diverse range of school and community stakeholders to ensure high-quality implementation fidelity and sustainability.

- Data-driven decision-making and a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) have potential for ensuring that school safety programs are housed in an equitably structured framework that dispenses interventions accordingly while monitoring intervention effects.

- Although challenging, U.S. schools need to address their role in perpetuating systemic inequities in schools and discipline to implement meaningful change. A first step could be to identify how their discipline policies are contributing to the over-representation of students of color in special education classes, which has been linked to the school-to-prison pipeline for these youth. A critical second step is to have ongoing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training for all staff, teachers, and paraprofessionals to address topics such as implicit bias, cultural humility, and trauma-informed care.

- The allocation of funds to support a comprehensive approach to school safety is needed for hiring additional staff and providing resources to train adults to effectively address behavioral concerns surrounding trauma and mental health, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affects students of color.

Introduction

Schools have the potential to be safe environments where students can focus on learning and building relationships; however, for some students, schools are unsafe, and even traumatizing, environments. School violence is a complex phenomenon because it includes various forms of violence such as bullying, fighting, sexual violence, and school shootings (Espelage et al. 2013). During the 2017-2018 school year, 70.7% of public schools recorded at least one violent incident. Of these, 21.3% were considered serious (e.g., sexual assault, rape, threats, completed physical attacks or fights with a weapon, or robbery with or without a weapon) (Wang et al. 2020). Similarly, the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) survey of high school students found that in the past 12 months, 20% of students reported being bullied on school property, 8% reported being in a fight on school property, 7% reported being threatened or injured with a weapon, and 9% reported skipping school at least once due to feeling unsafe at, or on their way to, school in the past 30 days (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021a). Gender-based violence in schools has also been increasing. Between the 2015-2016 and 2017-2018 school years, data from the Civil Rights Data Collection survey indicated that school-based sexual violence reports increased by 55% (U.S. Department of Education 2020). Finally, though quite rare compared to gun violence in the community, gun violence at school remains a safety concern for students, parents, school staff, and society at large. For example, in the 2017-2018 school year, there were 56 school-associated violent deaths, which included 46 homicides (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). According to the Center for Homeland Defense and Security K-12 School Shooting Database website, there were 249 shootings in 2021 and as of May 2022 there had been 153 school shootings, defined as incidents when "a gun is brandished, is fired, or a bullet hits school property for any reason, regardless of the number of victims (including zero), time, day of the week, or reason." In 2021, these shootings resulted in 168 injuries and 42 deaths (Riedman and O'Neill n.d.). This represents more school shootings than the 1970-1980 school years combined (Riedman and O'Neill n.d.). It is important for schools to recognize and address the broad spectrum of violent behaviors occurring in schools to protect all students.

Youth who experience violence tend to have worse academic and psychosocial outcomes; report higher rates of behavioral and mental health problems such as depression, substance abuse, and suicide; and are more likely to experience academic difficulties

and future violence victimization and/or perpetration (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021b; Polanin et al. 2020). Despite its prevalence and potential for negative long-term effects, research shows that school violence, even in the most serious instances, is preventable. The U.S. Secret Service's report, *Protecting America's Schools,* reviewed 41 cases of school violence occurring between 2008 and 2017 and found that most instances of targeted school violence such as school shootings were predictable and preventable (Alathari et al. 2019). To prevent and/or mitigate violence, schools and communities must develop and implement a comprehensive school safety framework that is multifaceted, tailored to the school and community context, and involves members of the school, community, police, juvenile justice, and mental health response teams. Nickerson and colleagues (2021) reviewed a series of reports to highlight critical components of comprehensive school safety. A few examples of these reports included: *Final Report of the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission* (Malloy 2015); *Report on the Arapahoe High School Shooting* (Goodrum and Woodward 2016); *Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety* (U.S. Department of Education 2018); *Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School Public Safety Commission Initial Report* (Gualtieri et al. 2019); and *K-12 Education: Characteristics of School Shootings* (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2020). Nickerson and colleagues (2021) offered the following recommendations to further promote school safety: "(a) creating a positive school climate; (b) providing prevention programming to promote healthy social-emotional development; (c) enhancing reporting of signs of violence and suspicious activity and conducting threat assessments; (d) protecting people and mitigating violence through training, safe school design, and security; and (e) responding to and recovering from crisis" (p. 162). Interestingly, Nickerson and colleagues (2021) mention "equity" only once in their article, and it was referenced in relation to students of color in the presence of school police. This suggests a need for further, deeper consideration of equity in school safety initiatives beyond a discussion of school policing.

Overview of Comprehensive School Safety Initiative

In response to concerns about school safety, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) launched the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI). From 2014-2017, CSSI awarded $246 million to nearly 100 different safety initiatives in K-12 schools. CSSI seeks to identify and understand root causes and consequences of school violence and develop a knowledge base that can be used to implement programs and policies to protect and enhance outcomes for students and schools. NIJ has also funded additional projects, such as an evaluation of the literature on school safety programs and practices, development of school safety technology, and enhancement of data collection for school safety. The scope of projects funded under CSSI ranges from determining the causes and consequences of school violence to evaluating various strategies for promoting school safety. Research has included evaluating mental health and trauma-informed responses, restorative justice, and implementing training for school resource officers (SROs) to ultimately develop the knowledge base about what makes U.S. schools safe. Given the breadth of knowledge produced and disseminated by these CSSI projects, there is a need for a white paper to synthesize these findings to inform school safety practitioners how to focus their efforts on three main elements of comprehensive school safety: physical safety, school climate, and student behavior. These findings will be centered around the need for equity-focused programming as the country recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.
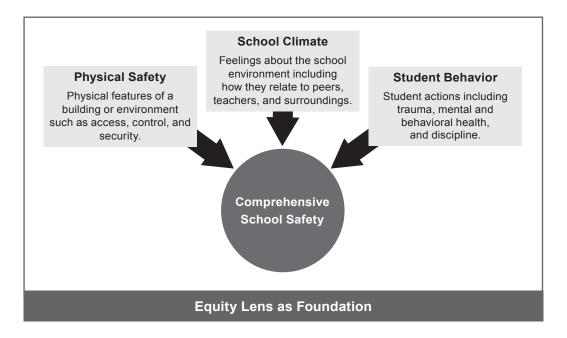
Current Context: COVID and Racial Equity

Nearly two years after the onset of COVID-19, the impacts of this pandemic are still being felt by the education system. Schools across the country need to be prepared to support students who have experienced varying levels of trauma, mental health issues, and loss, coupled with the array of pandemic-related economic, social, emotional, behavioral, and learning challenges for students (Hamilton and Ercikan 2022). While all students have experienced some degree of interruption to their learning and socialization, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted students from marginalized communities, including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities (Minkos and Gelbar 2021; Smith 2020; Van Lancker and Parolin 2020). Researchers expect that the pandemic will most negatively affect Black children who are facing a combination of mental and physical health, academic, and disciplinary inequities (Belsha 2020; Keels 2020). In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, communities of color were also facing the effects of a racial equality movement. National media coverage of the killings of Black Americans by law enforcement resulted in a national outcry to systematically evaluate and reform policing in America. The COVID-19 pandemic and the current public pressure to address systemic racism in the United States forced researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to reexamine the word "safety" and what it means to feel safe as Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) in schools and communities, highlighting the need for a comprehensive and equitable school safety approach. As the country recovers from the effects of the pandemic and continues to address racial inequalities, schools must collectively work toward social justice through understanding, affirming, and effectively supporting all students in this current reality.

Defining Comprehensive School Safety

A comprehensive approach to school safety should manage harm by assessing and addressing the malleable risk and protective factors to reduce school violence, while simultaneously promoting prosocial behavior (Kingston et al. 2018). Youth violence prevention researchers and practitioners recommend an interdisciplinary and coordinated approach to implement the public health model of reducing risk factors across all levels of the social ecology, including individuals, families, schools, peer groups, community, and policies (Fagan and Catalano 2013; Kingston et al. 2016, 2018; Mercy and Vivolo-Kantor 2016). School safety is a multifaceted concept, consisting of physical safety, school climate, and student behavior (see Exhibit 1). Individually, each of these forms of safety are imperative for a student's ability to effectively engage in learning at school. These ideals are also closely interrelated and have strong effects on each other. Research indicates that school climate and physical safety are fundamental to preventing school violence (Gregory et al. 2021a). Additionally, managing student behaviors contributes to a positive school climate, which can prevent threats to students' physical safety (Coelho et al. 2020). There is no single cause of violence and no single solution to prevent school violence in schools and communities; however, understanding the interconnectedness of these three factors can facilitate effective programming and implementation that is unique to each school.

Exhibit 1. Domains of School Safety

Physical Safety

The broadest category of school safety is physical safety, which refers to the physical features of a building or environment, such as access, control, and security (NIJ 2020). Physical safety is an important element of school safety as it shapes the environment where students spend most of their time. Strategies to improve physical safety may also serve as the first line of defense for school safety incidents of all severities. Changes in physical safety occurred primarily after the Columbine shooting in 1999, when schools became concerned about needing to implement visible safety measures to deter large-scale threats to students (Addington 2014). Although they have been implemented in many schools, physical safety practices such as metal detectors, security cameras, and armed teachers are more likely to be utilized in low resource schools due to the costs associated with more intensive responses such as counselors or mental health services (Zimmerman and Astor 2021). However, intensive security measures in the absence of other positive school climate initiatives may send a message to students that the campus is not safe, potentially having a negative impact on school climate and student morale (Addington 2014; Johnson et al. 2018). It is important for schools to balance the use of physical safety measures with other types of approaches to promote positive school climates.

One's physical safety is also affected by one's psychological perceptions of safety at school. Psychological safety refers to the idea that students are in an environment free from psychological violence, which allows them to feel safe and supported and promotes a sense of belonging (Baeva et al. 2015). Psychological safety allows students to speak freely and be their authentic selves without fear of rejection, which facilitates genuine, trusting relationships with teachers (Wanless and Winters 2018). As adults develop meaningful

relationships with students, this creates an environment where students are psychologically safe, which may facilitate more desirable student behavior and improve safety outcomes (Bradshaw et al. 2021).

School Climate

In contrast to physical safety, school climate refers to individuals' feelings about the school environment, including how they relate to their peers, teachers, and surroundings, and their perceptions of school safety. School climate improvement processes have been employed as a tool to address school safety issues (Bradshaw et al. 2021; Cohen and Espelage 2020). Though difficult to clearly define due to its complexity, school climate surveys are often used to measure student, parent, and school staff perceptions regarding the environment. Hanson and Voight (2014) identified several characteristics of school climate, including student-adult relationships, opportunities for meaningful student participation, safety, and connectedness. School climate is an important predictor of a variety of student and school outcomes (Cohen and Espelage 2020). Positive school climate has been linked to stronger social-emotional competence, risk prevention, and improved development as indicated by positive academic, behavioral, and psychosocial outcomes (Konold et al. 2018; Osher and Berg 2017; Thapa et al. 2013; Wang and Degol 2016). Alternatively, poor climate is linked to higher rates of violence at school (see Turanovic et al. 2020 for a meta-analysis). Perceptions of school climate also impact a variety of youth behaviors, such as their relationships with adults, willingness to seek help, and school connectedness, all of which are integral to student school safety (Cohen and Espelage 2020). Also, it is important to recognize that perceptions of school climate vary within and between racial and ethnic groups, with students of color reporting lower school safety and connectedness than their white peers (Anyon et al. 2016; Voight et al. 2015). This discrepancy highlights the need for an inclusive and equitable school environment, where all students, regardless of identity, can access resources and create meaningful relationships.

Student Behavior

Finally, an integral part of the school safety framework is student behavior. NIJ (2020) considers student behavior to be inclusive of trauma, mental and behavioral health, and discipline. Students experience numerous personal events that shape their development and behavior. These experiences impact not only a youth's ability to cultivate meaningful relationships and succeed academically, but also often manifest themselves as behavioral challenges in the classroom or school community (Cavanaugh 2016; Lansing et al. 2019; Lee et al. 2016; Plumb et al. 2016). As mentioned, students of color experience elevated rates of stress and trauma, resulting in additional academic and behavioral difficulties (Mendelson et al. 2015). Understanding the root causes of violent student behavior allows schools to address student needs, creating a more cohesive environment more effectively and supporting improved student outcomes.

Need for Equity-Focused School Safety Programming

In schools, violent behaviors and how they are perceived, reinforced, and addressed continues to be a systemic problem (Gregory et al. 2021a). To intervene and prevent violence, educators often rely on external control and zero-tolerance strategies (e.g., out-of-class and out-of-school suspensions). Research shows that these approaches have

deleterious impacts that both reflect and reinforce marginalization and institutionalized racism (Mittleman 2018). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the national outcry to dismantle systemic racism have underscored concerns that racial disparities in school discipline and the consequences of exclusionary practices will widen if schools disproportionately punish students of color for absenteeism, trauma-related behaviors, or violations in COVID-related health safety protocols (Belsha 2020). Based on the current approaches to school discipline, it is important that schools are explicit about creating and implementing a comprehensive school safety framework that centers equity at its core (Gregory et al. 2021a).

Current School Safety Approaches

Despite the decrease in youth violence over the past 40 years (Puzzanchera 2020), youth misbehavior continues to be a criminalized experience through zero-tolerance policies, target hardening, and policing in schools. This criminalization contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately impacts students of color (Gregory et al. 2021). It is important to understand the current state of school safety measures to address gaps in their efficacy and suggest alternatives or adjustments to make these policies more equitable for all students, with a particular focus on students of color.

Zero-Tolerance and Exclusionary Disciplinary Policies

Originating in criminal justice, zero-tolerance policies "mandate the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" (Skiba et al. 2008, p. 852). Despite their strict nature, zero-tolerance and other exclusionary policies became commonplace in schools in the 1980s and 1990s as a shift occurred toward criminalizing juvenile delinquency (Skiba et al. 2008; Curran 2019; Smith 2015). While these measures were intended to make schools safer through consequences that were expected to deter harmful behavior, research has shown that they are ineffective, harmful to students, and applied disproportionately to students of color and students with disabilities (Skiba et al. 2008; Hoffman 2014; Smith 2015; Wadwha 2016). Exclusionary discipline has also been linked to negative school climate and decreased connectedness to adults, particularly among students of color (Anyon et al. 2016; Mitchell and Bradshaw 2013). For many students, school environments are protective (e.g., provide adult supervision and support and access to breakfast and lunch). However, exclusionary policies such as suspensions and expulsions that remove students from this protective environment result in learning and resource losses that are harmful to the individual student and the community (Noltemeyer 2015). Although support for zero tolerance and the use of suspension and expulsion has dropped considerably since 2010 (Hirschfield 2018), the size of the discipline gap has not changed (U.S. Department of Education 2020). Further, in a 2019 statewide (Virginia) survey of 108,888 students and 10,990 teachers, the authors found that a majority of surveyed teachers (74%) supported the use of zero tolerance as an effective discipline practice. They also found that in schools where teachers were supportive of zero-tolerance policies, there were greater numbers of suspensions and expulsions and low student feelings of safety (Huang and Cornell 2021). Although frequently utilized, research suggests that zero-tolerance policies should not be the sole approach to school safety.

Traditional Target Hardening

In addition to the reliance on zero-tolerance policies, target hardening techniques are commonly implemented in schools. Target hardening refers to the technique of making a building or an area more difficult to attack through practices such as cameras, fences, metal detectors, clear backpacks, fortified glass, and security systems. Despite their intention to minimize schools as targets for violence, these practices frame students as threats and negatively impact the school environment (Schrek et al 2003; Warnick and Kapa 2019). In a meta-analysis of school violence, Turanovic and colleagues (2020) found that target hardening measures, such as metal detectors, security cameras, and police presence on campus, had virtually no relationship with instances of violence or victimization at school. They conclude, "Finally, traditional target hardening approaches to school violence—including having a police presence at schools along with other formal security measures—are not sufficient solutions for reducing school violence and victimization." (Turanovic et al. 2020, p. 4). Additionally, these policies are particularly common in communities with a large proportion of students of color, which may increase disparities in discipline (Zimmerman and Astor 2021).

Alternatives to Zero-Tolerance Policies and Traditional Target Hardening

There are several alternatives to zero-tolerance policies and traditional target hardening approaches that can be used to address school safety needs, including restorative justice practices, environmental design, emergency operations plan, threat assessment, and improving student-teacher relationships. Each of these practices provides opportunities for equity, yet the empirical evidence still needs to center on equity-focused school safety initiatives while addressing effects on the broader school community.

Restorative Practices in K-12 Settings

Restorative practice (RP) is an approach that can be used in schools that involves a wide range of nonpunitive, relationship-centered approaches for proactively avoiding harm and repairing harm when it occurs (Gregory et al. 2016). RP is rooted in restorative justice (RJ), which has been employed for many decades in juvenile courts, domestic violence courts, and the criminal justice system to divert individuals from punitive environments (Pavelka 2016). Both RJ and RP view delinquency or disruptive behavior as harm done to people and the community, thus requiring input from the community when establishing consequences (Gregory et al. 2016; Robinson et al. 2021). RP in schools is a theorized process that is based on creating and repairing relationships, rather than assignment of punishment at the discretion of one adult. This gives victims and community members the opportunity to define their needs while holding the offender accountable and creating a space for each party to be an active participant in resolving conflict (Katic et al. 2020). RPs are designed to teach empathy and understanding, as well as to manage conflict by empowering those who cause harm to make things right, and, in the process, heal those who were harmed (Gregory et al. 2016; Song et al. 2020). To implement RP in the classroom requires a careful examination and deconstruction of the power dynamics between teachers, administrators, school staff, and students (Morrison and Vaandering 2012). The purpose of this cultural shift allows for the democratization of power and the recognition of student agency to promote a safe school environment.

The shift from exclusion and zero tolerance to RP in schools and districts is increasing at varying speeds and modalities across the country. Several states, including California, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania, have been implementing an RP approach for several years and have evaluated the impact. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2020) conducted a recent review of research published since 1999 on the effectiveness of RJ and RP in K-12 U.S. schools. Their review included studies that utilized quantitative methods to measure the effectiveness of RP on student and school-level outcomes, including student misbehavior, exclusionary discipline, bullying, racial discipline disparities, student attendance, school climate, and academics. Results of this review suggest that RP and RJ programs can improve school climates and reduce student misbehavior and school discipline; however, there were less consistent impacts on bullying, student absenteeism, and academic performance. The authors concluded that RJ and RP in K-12 schools can improve experiences of all school members, including teachers, staff, and especially students.

In addition, research suggests that safe classroom and school environments can provide students, especially those with marginalized identities, the opportunity to heal from discrimination and generational trauma, as well as a space to develop their social and emotional skills (Cohen 2018). As noted, evaluations of RP programs in schools aimed at reducing racial discipline disparities rarely include causal models. One exception is the randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted by Augustine and colleagues (2018). These authors found that RP implementation led to reduction in the racial discipline gap between Black and white students in an RCT with 22 intervention and 22 control schools. Other, less rigorous studies have reported associations between RP and discipline. Gregory and colleagues (2018) analyzed Denver public school data and found that suspension rates decreased for all racial categories and that the discipline gap between Black and white students decreased from 9% to 5% after implementing RP throughout the district. However, another study in a large urban school district (Anyon et al. 2016) found that although discipline rates decreased overall, the racial discipline gap did not. There is a need for additional research on best practices for implementing RP in schools and how to ensure equity in school discipline.

Implementing RP in schools requires significant foundational work, such as defining RP, obtaining buy-in, and allocation of funds to ensure success. School administrators should note that the transition to a restorative school culture can take from three to five years (Marsh 2017). In an attempt to guide schools via best practices of RP implementation, Gregory and colleagues (2021b) conducted a qualitative study to identify critical indicators of RP implementation through interview data with 18 school-based RP practitioners and principals from a large urban district in the Northeast. Twelve indicators of successful RP implementation were identified: (1) administrative support for RP, (2) schoolwide buy-in, (3) disciplinary policy reform, (4) data-based decision-making, (5) equity and social justice lens, (6) ongoing professional development, (7) student leadership and voice, (8) family and community involvement, (9) social and emotional learning training, (10) community building circles, (11) relational repair tools in classrooms, and (12) restorative conferences to heal more serious harms. These indicators are guiding practices for schools that are committed to designing a multiyear RP initiative and may vary as a function of the particular school and community context.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is a multidisciplinary approach to crime prevention that uses urban and architectural design and the management of built and natural environments (Jeffrey 1971). CPTED strategies are based on the notion that the physical environment impacts human choice and behavior and can be controlled to reduce victimization. CPTED emphasizes natural and subtle design methods to deter illegal or delinquent activity by designing schools that are configured to promote natural surveillance, access control, and territoriality/maintenance (Schneider et al. 2000). First, natural surveillance relates to the ability to see into and out of an area to optimize the potential to spot suspicious persons or activities. For schools, this could include open layouts, window views, and transparent fencing. The logic of natural surveillance is based on the notion that individuals will be less likely to commit crimes if they sense they are being observed (Schneider 2010). Second, access control strategies have been employed for many years by schools and include limiting the number of points of entry for outsiders to come into the school and requiring visitors and family members to provide identification to the front office to gain access (Robers 2015). Third, territoriality and maintenance go together in CPTED. Territoriality involves measures that reinforce a message of ownership over the school, including signs restricting access and directing all visitors to the main office. To reinforce the notion of territoriality and ownership, it is also important to maintain the school property to send a message to visitors that there is a sense of ownership of the school and the school grounds (Schneider 2010).

Although present in some definitions/models, there is disagreement among scholars as to whether target hardening is an element of CPTED (Cozens and Love 2015). Although some view target hardening as part of CPTED, others see it as an alternative to the tough approaches of target hardening. While the goals of both target hardening and CPTED are to reduce incidents of crime or violence in an area by modifying the surroundings, there are important differences in the way they are operationalized. CPTED emphasizes facilitating safety utilizing the natural surroundings rather than utilizing external controls such as security, metal detectors, etc., promoting feelings of community and safety rather than control and security. Very few large-scale studies have evaluated the impact of CPTED on school violence outcomes (see Lamoreaux and Sulkowski 2020). However, a recent study assessed the relationship between student perceptions of safety and CPTED by examining adherence to CPTED principles and students' perceptions of school climate and safety (Vagi et al. 2018). This study included self-report student data from more than 4,000 students across 50 middle schools. Study results indicated that schools with higher adherence to CPTED principles were perceived as safer and had lower reported rates of school violence. Specifically, students attending schools that were built consistent with CPTED principles felt safer in the restrooms, girls' locker rooms, parking lots, and bus loading areas. Although these findings suggest that CPTED may deter school violence and improve perceptions of school climate, it is the only large-scale study to date, and future research needs to be conducted to understand which CPTED principles are the most robustly associated with greater school safety and reduced violence and crime.

Emergency Operations Plans

A critical component of school safety is the development and implementation of an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). An EOP is a document that outlines how a school will prepare, respond, and recover in the event of a school safety concern, such as a natural disaster or active shooter (NIJ 2020). To create an EOP, school officials and first responders

work together to articulate and formalize a plan that keeps students and staff safe. Schools play a key role in taking preventative and protective measures to stop an emergency from occurring or reducing the impact of an incident. When a school-based emergency occurs that threatens school safety, school personnel are charged with responding immediately, providing first aid, notifying response partners and parents, and providing instructions before first responders arrive. To provide a cohesive, coordinated response, schools often partner with law enforcement, fire officials, emergency medical services personnel, public health departments, and other governmental organizations. In collaboration with their local government and community partners, schools can take steps to plan for potential emergencies through the creation of a school EOP.

Despite the benefits of having a clearly outlined plan, a review by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) found that only 32 states required districts to have an EOP. EOPs are intended to be created with the input of a team of school staff and community members to reflect the unique concerns of various stakeholders and the diverse needs of the student population (U.S. Department of Education 2013). A local team that establishes an EOP can also consider safety concerns that may be particularly relevant in their unique context, such as weather or animals. Plans should also be referenced and reviewed frequently to ensure they are representative of the current best practices in school safety (U.S. Department of Education 2013; NIJ 2020). Finally, schools should regularly train staff and students on the plan so everyone is prepared and can react quickly in the event of an emergency. However, the gaps in the literature on EOPs are deep, such that it is unknown how EOPs are implemented and how efficacious they are at improving school safety. While research on EOPs and equity in the school context is limited, public health officials recognize the importance of having team members specifically focused on ensuring equity in emergency responses, resulting in better outcomes for minoritized groups (Gooden et al. 2009; Jollon n.d.). For example, EOPs could outline specific plans to communicate emergencies to non-English-speaking families or to ensure that accommodations are made for students with disabilities. However, there were no studies to date that evaluated EOPs as an equitable school safety practice. Schools should explicitly consider the role of equity in their EOP to ensure they are achieving safety for all students, but the research on how to implement, train, and evaluate equitable EOPs is scarce. There is a need for additional research on best practices for schools developing equity-based EOPs that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Threat Assessments

Threat assessments refer to the formalized four-step process of identifying and responding to a threat: (1) identify the individual who may pose a threat, (2) collect information on that individual from multiple sources, (3) use this information to evaluate whether that person poses a legitimate threat of violence, and (4) create and implement a formalized plan to mitigate the threat (Modzeleski and Randazzo 2018; Randazzo and Plummer 2009). In 2013, Virginia became the first state to mandate threat assessment teams in all K-12 schools and saw promising results. In a sample of 12,000 reported threats during the 2017-2018 school year, 97% were resolved without an attempt to carry out the threat, 3% were averted by school authorities, and it appeared that all the cases had been resolved without a serious injury (Cornell and Maeng 2020). Since then, threat assessments have become a common practice in U.S. schools, with 44% of schools having a formal threat assessment team in place during the 2017-2018 school year (Diliberti et al. 2019). Despite the difficulty of identifying violent acts at the individual level, Cornell and colleagues (2018) discuss the

importance of threat assessments as a tool for understanding potential threats to mitigate violence at the broader school level.

Although threat assessments serve as a promising tool for reducing school violence, it is essential that they do so in an equitable manner. Reeves and Brock (2018) provide an in-depth overview of the threat assessment process, including the importance of identifying and addressing existing biases in the disciplinary system. Similarly, O'Malley and colleagues (2019) highlighted the need for additional cultural considerations in threat assessment procedures to reduce the common overcriminalization of students of color. While additional research is needed to further support their equitable use, Cornell and Maeng (2020) found that their threat assessment approach yielded no disparities between Black, Hispanic, and white students in disciplinary outcomes, including suspensions, expulsions, or law enforcement actions, supporting their promise as an equitable practice.

In addition to formalized threat assessment teams, schools may also implement reporting tools, such as tiplines, to assist in the process of identifying threats. Students are privy to information that teachers and other school adults may not have, making them an important part of the reporting process (Espelage et al. 2021a). While tiplines are still in their infancy, with 75% being less than 5 years old, they show promise as an effective reporting tactic (Planty et al. 2019). In a review of parent and teacher perspectives on the implementation of tiplines, Espelage and colleagues (2021a) found that adults perceive tiplines as a helpful way for students to report various personal and school problems. However, concerns arose regarding the feasibility of implementation as it related to resources and staffing. Although research is needed to further develop an evidence base for tipline implementation, preliminary studies show they may be an effective tool that addresses student-level safety concerns (Espelage et al. 2021a).

Student-Teacher Relationships

A critical component of promoting school safety and preventing school violence is fostering strong student-teacher relationships and peer relationships (Coyle 2021). Students' perceptions of connectedness to each other and to teachers, as well as to the school more broadly, have been shown to be associated with fewer behavioral disruptions in the classroom and lower levels of aggression (Steffgen et al. 2013; Thapa et al. 2013; Waasdorp et al. 2011). Students who feel a greater connection to school are more willing to help others who are experiencing aggression or peer victimization (Barhight et al. 2017; Waasdorp et al. 2011). When students have meaningful relationships with adults in their school, they feel a stronger sense of community and trust, which increases the likelihood that they will share school safety concerns with adults. Pollack and colleagues (2008) described an association between student and staff relations and willingness to report safety concerns. Students who reported threats indicated they trusted school staff to believe them and act appropriately, whereas students who were unwilling to report safety concerns cited an anticipation of negative or ineffective responses from adults. This finding indicates that teachers and other school staff should take an active role in addressing school safety issues by intentionally and consistently building a strong rapport with students.

Strong student-teacher relationships may be particularly important for students of color. Gaias and colleagues (2020) found that the Equity-Explicit Establish-Maintain-Restore (E-EMR) student-teacher relationship intervention improved school belongingness, problem

behaviors, grade point average, emotional regulation, and motivation for students of color relative to white students. Student-teacher relationships that reflect an equitable and inclusive mindset are important for all students to feel safe and valued in their classrooms. There is a growing body of literature on diversifying the teaching profession as a means of promoting equity in schools. These studies have primarily focused on academic outcomes and more recently, social-emotional outcomes and school climate (Carver 2018). Research indicates that teachers of color boost the academic performance of students of color (Boser 2011). However, less is known about the role teachers of color play in promoting school safety and equity. Lindsay and Hart (2017) examined whether exposure to same-race teachers affected the rate at which Black students received exclusionary discipline as measured by in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsion. They found consistent evidence that exposure to same-race teachers was associated with reduced rates of exclusionary discipline for Black students. This relationship was consistent across elementary, middle, and high school grade levels; for female and male students; and for low-income students. Interestingly, they found that exposure to same-race teachers reduced office referrals for "willful defiance" across all grade levels, suggesting that variability in teacher discretion plays a significant role in school discipline. Additional research is needed to better understand the effect of teacher roles on equity in school safety.

School Resource Officers

Security staff, including school resource officers (SROs) and other law enforcement officials, are a common safety tool in U.S. schools. During the 2017-2018 school year, 51% of public schools in the United States had a sworn law enforcement officer on campus at least one day a week (NCES 2020), with higher numbers for schools with a majority of students of color (Mann et al. 2019). The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) (2012) outlines three key roles of an SRO: educator, informal counselor, and law enforcement officer. Known as the triad model, this model encourages school security to fill these roles and build relationships with students to improve school safety. Despite the intent of this model, the roles and responsibilities of school security staff vary significantly based on the individual or school context (Merkwae 2015). These variations make measuring the fidelity and effectiveness of school security personnel challenging. Research has found varying outcomes associated with the use of school security, including a decrease in serious crime (Jennings et al. 2011; Sorenson et al. 2020), increased incidents of crime (Devlin and Gottfredson 2018; Gottfredson et al. 2020; Na and Gottfredson 2013), and decreased school connectedness (Theriot 2016). Reliance on police officers in schools also contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline, where students are punished through the criminal justice system for minor offenses rather than counseled (Nance 2015; NIJ 2017). Fisher and Hennesy (2016) found a 21% increase in incidents of exclusionary discipline after introducing SROs. A review of school policing programs can be found in Javdani (2019).

In addition to concerns about general effectiveness, amid the Black Lives Matter and racial justice movements, the model of using police officers in school is under fire in many school districts. Research shows that students of color report fewer benefits and less favorable attitudes toward the presence of police in schools, perhaps due to trauma associated with being historically overpoliced and underprotected by law enforcement (Advancement Project 2018; Pentek and Eisenberg 2018; Theriot and Orme 2016). Black

and brown students who attend schools with a police presence experience heightened rates of mental health problems, such as anxiety, stress, and fear, as well as decreased academic performance (Nayeb and Meek 2020).

Recommendations for School Security

There are recommended improvements to make school security systems more equitable. First, training for SROs must be expanded beyond its current level. Ryan (2018) found that 76% of states do not mandate that school security receive training on working with youth beyond what they receive in the police academy, which typically comprises less than one percent of total training. Many security staff are current or former law enforcement and therefore may approach their duties as though they are dealing with criminal offenders rather than youth (Theriot 2009). Although there is some emerging evidence from NIJ-funded projects that school security professionals might have some basic knowledge of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), additional training is needed to support their understanding of how trauma impacts student behavior and ways of intervening effectively (Espelage et al. 2020, 2021b). Schools must also enforce consistent applications of discipline. Currently, there is a tremendous amount of discretion involved with school discipline, resulting in inconsistent and inequitable enforcement of punishment depending on an individual's background or disposition. In a qualitative review of SROs' responses to student infractions, Robinson and colleagues (2021) identified distinct variations in officer responses to the same offenses within the same district (e.g., expulsion vs. referral to a counselor), highlighting the need for additional guidelines around consistent enforcement of policies. Districts should outline and communicate clear expectations surrounding disciplinary actions to ensure equal enforcement for all students. Finally, these expectations and any others highlighted by the partnering district should be outlined in a memorandum of understanding (MOU). MOUs are important to ensure that all staff are maintaining a high degree of professionalism and adhering to all standards determined by the school. Despite the large number of SROs in U.S. schools, only 51% of elementary and 70% of secondary schools report having official policies or documents that outline the officer's role at school (Musu-Gillette et al. 2018).

Comprehensive Systematic Programming

In addition to adjusting current school safety policies to be more equitable, there are additional systematic frameworks and programming that can be implemented at the school level to further address student needs. School security programming cannot be effective if implemented inconsistently, and programs must be schoolwide and include input from a variety of stakeholders for the best chance at diffusion, adoption, and sustainability. Effective frameworks or approaches for supporting equitable discipline include trauma-responsive approaches and transformative or equity-focused social emotional learning (SEL).

Trauma-Responsive Approaches

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or youth experiences of trauma are prevalent and influence student behavior in school. ACEs include, but are not limited to, stressful familial situations, such as divorce, living with a parent who has a mental illness, sexual

abuse, parental incarceration, and substance abuse (Felitti et al. 1998). Nationwide, 30% of children under 18 have experienced at least one ACE (National Conference of State Legislatures 2021). Racial and ethnic disparities are also particularly evident with 61% of Black and 51% of Hispanic children experiencing at least one ACE (National Conference of State Legislatures 2021). ACEs are associated with learning difficulties, internalizing and externalizing mental health problems during adolescence, as well as an increased likelihood of physical health issues and incarceration in adulthood (Burke et al. 2011; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019; Hunt et al. 2017; Jäggi et al. 2016; Perfect et al. 2016). Understanding the role of trauma and effectively addressing trauma is a key issue for equity in school discipline as misbehavior, particularly from students of color, is often the result of misattributed trauma (Addington 2019; Keels 2020). In order to ensure that the needs of students with trauma are being met, schools must explicitly address these widespread experiences of trauma.

Although trauma-informed language is prevalent today among practitioners, research on trauma is relatively new and as a result there is still confusion and disagreement in the field about what constitutes a trauma-informed program (Thomas et al. 2019). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) conceptualizes trauma-informed care as being grounded in four principles and six key elements. The four principles to which trauma-informed programming must adhere are called the four Rs: *realize, recognize, respond,* and *resist re-traumatization.* This framework ensures the system consists of caregivers who understand the concept of trauma, possess an ability to identify the signs when someone is experiencing trauma, and can assist in a way that is appropriate and does not subject the victim to additional trauma (SAMHSA 2014). The six key elements that guide services are *safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice;* and *cultural, historical, and gender issues* (SAMHSA 2014). Using these principles and key elements, schools must address the systemic issues that exist in education to support an environment where all youth can feel safe, welcome, and valued, as well as to facilitate feelings of collaboration, empowerment, and agency.

Despite the well-established evidence base for therapeutic trauma-specific interventions, less research exists on the use of trauma-informed approaches. Thomas and colleagues (2019) found that promising results were associated with a variety of trauma programs. However, methodologies and designs were inconsistent, making generalizability difficult. Additionally, a review conducted by Maynard and colleagues (2019) found that no rigorous evaluations have been completed on trauma-informed programming in schools. Due to its nascency, additional research is needed on trauma-informed approaches to better understand their effectiveness for a variety of outcomes and their role in equitable school safety practices.

Transformative Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional Learning (SEL) is the process by which children and adults practice interrelated skills such as self-awareness, self-management and regulation, social awareness, building relationships, and responsible decision-making. SEL skills are multifaceted and critical for well-being, learning, and academic success (Jones et al. 2017). SEL can occur formally at school (e.g., SEL curriculum) or informally in a variety of contexts throughout development (e.g., socialization). SEL programs have been regarded as an effective

intervention for schools and classrooms, showing positive changes in both social and academic outcomes (Corcoran et al. 2018; Durlak et al. 2011; Schonert-Reichl 2019; Taylor et al. 2017), with the benefits extending to disabled students (Espelage et al. 2015, 2016). In a study of three school districts (Syracuse, Denver, and Cleveland) that implemented SEL-oriented policies, each saw a significant reduction in use of exclusionary discipline practices (Gregory and Fergus, 2017). Although these outcomes are promising, students of color were still disciplined more harshly than white students, highlighting the need for additional research on SEL, particularly research that focuses on addressing the needs of marginalized students.

Although formal SEL programming is marketed in schools as a strategy for all youth, some scholars have criticized it for having an individualistic approach and not explicitly addressing the relational and cultural dynamics of power and oppression endured by marginalized and historically underresourced students (Hoffman 2009; Shriver and Weissberg 2020; Simmons 2019). As a response to the social and educational inequities highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the emerging call for racial justice, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) changed its definition of SEL to transformative SEL, which centers diversity, equity, and inclusion in SEL research and practice moving forward (Jagers et al. 2019, 2021). Transformative SEL is aimed at redistributing power to promote social justice through increased engagement in school and civic life. It emphasizes the development of identity, agency, belonging, curiosity, and collaborative problem-solving within the preexisting CASEL framework (Jagers et al. 2019). Transformative SEL is defined as "a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences; learn to critically examine root causes of inequity; and develop collaborative solutions to community and social problems'' (Jagers et al. 2018, p. 3). The intersection of formal SEL and equity emphasizes the need for direct connections between individual cultural assets and social and emotional development (Jagers et al. 2019).

Transformative SEL is theorized to work best when implemented with a comprehensive approach to combat the systemic issues that oppress marginalized students and families (Elias 2019; Jagers et al. 2019). Through a transformative SEL framework, students, families, and communities work together to foster positive change to advance equity and diversity. Research-practice partnerships between researchers and local stakeholders, such as school administrators, districts, and families, can inform the implementation of transformative SEL in classrooms and schools (Jagers et al. 2021; Williams and Jagers 2020). Collaborative partnerships can be established at every level of a transformative SEL program from the foundation, planning, implementation, and continuous improvement phases (Jagers et al. 2021).

Frameworks for a Comprehensive School Safety Plan

Systemic inequities in education and school discipline demand systematic change (Kingston et al. 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that school safety initiatives are implemented schoolwide and include perspectives from a variety of stakeholders. School safety is a complex, constantly evolving phenomenon that must be rigorously examined and constantly reevaluated. Despite these challenges, there are common frameworks that can house security approaches in schools, including data-driven decision-making and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Additionally, there are ways to effectively implement these

frameworks with a focus on equitable school safety. It is important to note that while these frameworks can provide strategies to improve school climate and safety, schools do not exist in a vacuum and the individual context of the school, community, and population must inform decisions.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

Data-driven decision-making, sometimes referred to as data-based decision-making, refers to the systematic collection and analysis of various data sources to inform decisions (Hamilton et al. 2009). The use of data-driven decision-making allows schools to understand and reflect on their situational context to make educated decisions about interventions and policies. Data-driven decision-making consists of collecting, analyzing, and reporting data, then communicating and using these data for school improvement (American Association of School Administrators 2002). For a school not currently using data-driven decision-making, beginning to do so may feel overwhelming. First, schools should consider creating a team of invested stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds to ensure that the team is reflective of the school's population and needs (see Schildkamp et al. 2019 for strategies on creating an effective data team). Data are intended to be a support tool, not a replacement for a team of diverse and informed stakeholders. Schools are incredibly complex environments, and the expertise of school community members is imperative to successful policies. By engaging this team in review of these data, educators are able to apply their own professional judgment to the findings, as well as contextualize these data within their school's unique framework (Mandinach and Schildkamp 2021). It is also important to consider the role of students in this process. As key members of the community, students should have a voice in the policies and procedures in their school (Kennedy and Datnow 2011; Espelage et al. 2021a). Students may also be privy to information that is inaccessible to staff and administration, thus bringing a unique perspective and highlighting salient issues.

After a team is convened, it is important to consider what the school is hoping to address; having specific questions or goals in mind ensures that data review is targeted and meaningful. Bernhardt (1998) outlines several questions schools can use as a framework to begin assessing their data. Data review can begin once goals and questions have been formulated. Understanding and utilizing data that are currently being collected by the school, such as a schoolwide climate assessment or national survey tools (e.g., Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System), is valuable, but these data must be valid and reliable to avoid misinforming stakeholders and school safety approaches. Reviewing current data can help schools identify required changes to existing data collection procedures or if additional data are needed to address gaps. Using various sources and types of data (including quantitative and qualitative) allows stakeholders to capture a more complete picture of diverse student needs and ensure consistency between data sources (Mandinach and Schildkamp 2021).

After data have been collected and reviewed, schools should conduct a thorough and meaningful analysis for trends and patterns within their school, considering the questions they previously created. Stakeholders are then able to share this knowledge and inform change within their school community. Finally, it is important that this process is continuous. Transitioning to data-driven decision-making requires buy-in and willingness to change at the broad school level; this culture shift should permeate the entire school community for best effects.

It is important to note that existing data and systems to address discipline are not perfect, and as a result may include data that reflect biased disciplinary structures. To address this, scholars recommend explicitly considering equity in data-driven decision-making practices. One approach is critical data-driven decision-making, which highlights the importance of using data specifically to address inequities (Datnow and Park 2018; Dodman et al. 2021). By leveraging data to highlight inequities, schools can address both the problem at hand while improving the underlying school foundation and state of equity.

Multi-Tiered System of Support

A Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is an evidence-based approach that uses school data (e.g., climate survey, assessment data) to meet the needs of every student. Specifically, MTSS was designed to equitably prevent and intervene in cases of academic failure and behavioral problems by providing students with services and support at different levels: (1) universal: for all students, (2) targeted: for students at risk of academic failure and behavioral problems, and (3) intensive: for students with significant academic and behavioral challenges (Osher et al. 2016; Stephan et al. 2015). MTSS programs are being implemented across the country and are intended to significantly reduce the number of children mistakenly placed in special education or funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline. Decades of research demonstrate an overrepresentation of Black and brown students in special education and suggest that incorrect placement into special education has severe long-term outcomes (Artiles and Trent 1994; Ford 2012). Most children placed in special education or exceptional children's classrooms for behavioral challenges rarely return to their general education classrooms; therefore, it is critical that at-risk students have the chance to improve with different strategies in the environment. The parallels between the overrepresentation of students of color in special education and the juvenile justice system demonstrate the need for an equity-informed approach to interventions that strengthen academic and social behaviors.

As part of a CSSI-funded project, Kingston and colleagues (2018) used readiness and implementation data from the Safe Communities Safe Schools project to illustrate the barriers and propose comprehensive solutions to school safety. Although the term "evidence based" is widely used in comprehensive school safety, the actual criteria to meet the categorization of evidence based varies tremendously from informal satisfaction surveys to multiple randomized controlled trials (Elliott 2013). According to the review by Kingston and colleagues, a comprehensive approach to school safety integrates evidence-based strategies intentionally into a school's MTSS in the following ways: (1) providing professional development to all school staff to identify and support students with mental and/or behavioral health concerns, (2) educating all students about reporting safety concerns (e.g., to an anonymous tipline or a trusted adult) and bystander awareness (Elliott 2009; Kanan et al. 2016; Payne and Elliott 2011; Goodrum and Woodward 2016), and (3) following threat assessment policies and procedures for compliance with the Secret Service and Department of Education's guidelines (Fein 2002). As MTSS programs are being adopted across the country, researchers are finding there is significant variability in implementation and a need for research that examines MTSS and its role in promoting educational equity as it relates to student outcomes.

Summary and Need for Additional Research

School safety is a complex, multifaceted concept that has undergone rigorous research and evaluation (Kingston et al. 2018). Despite many efforts designed to improve school safety and create equitable environments, current policies and practices fall short of addressing this goal for many students. Schools use a combination of approaches to protect their students from threats of violence on campus such as metal detectors, school security, suspensions, and expulsions. Although the intentions of these policies are to make schools safer, in many cases they have little to no effect on school safety and are harmful to marginalized student populations, creating an environment where youth feel like suspects rather than students (Addington 2014; Johnson et al. 2018). Schools have a responsibility to keep students safe; however, traditional zero-tolerance, exclusionary, and hardening techniques have limited efficacy in reducing school violence, and we know that school violence involvement continues to be associated with serious adverse academic and psychological outcomes (Polanin et al. 2020). Research indicates school safety approaches should address the complex, underlying causes of misbehavior rather than responding with swift, one-size-fits-all punishment. By creating an environment where students feel respected and valued rather than suspected and feared, schools can begin to repair the harm caused by existing punitive structures, especially for racially and ethnically marginalized students.

One part of overcoming systemic inequities found in some school systems may be to shift from punishment-focused discipline to a more student-focused approach that considers issues surrounding equity in discipline. In many schools, conversations about how to explicitly address concerns related to equity in school discipline are just beginning. As such, additional research is needed on the effectiveness of practices intended to address disparities in discipline, specifically: (1) examining effective ways to shift from exclusion and zero-tolerance policies to restorative practices and (2) investigating how to implement school safety policies and plans that specifically promote equity. Recommendations are discussed in the following sections.

Shifting From Zero-Tolerance Practices to Restorative Approaches in School Safety

It is well established in the literature that schools that rely solely on zero-tolerance policies and practices that focus on establishing blame and assigning punishment do little to deter violence or improve school safety. The field should continue to explore the value of a restorative approach that considers and addresses the underlying causes of school violence. Adding restorative approaches to school safety plans takes significant effort and planning, resources, and a commitment from most school members. Schools need to consider their own unique context to address their students' needs most effectively. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, there are several steps that may support this progression. Further research is needed to establish an evidence base of best practices for restorative practices and implementation that has equitable school discipline outcomes for students.

Implementing Appropriate Policies and Programming

To ensure schools are meeting the needs of their students, schools need to reflect on their current school safety policies to determine if they are evidence based and effective. Using equity-focused, data-driven decision-making in an MTSS framework, schools can assess their current state of discipline and school-based programming to make educated decisions about weaknesses in their current approach. After these gaps are identified, schools can determine which policies they should update and if they should add additional programs to meet the needs of their students. Schools must actively work to dismantle disciplinary structures that are harmful to students and replace them with policies that are effective and inclusive. Working toward an environment that takes a more holistic approach to addressing student needs requires buy-in at every level to support this shared mission. Everyone from students to administrators must learn to take an approach that values repairing harm to relationships, building social-emotional skills, and addressing the historical root causes of stress and trauma over punishment. These policies and programs must be implemented schoolwide as research shows that inconsistent or intermittent program implementation is not sufficient for widespread change.

Reallocating School Resources

Additionally, schools need to have the appropriate resources to implement these schoolwide changes. Although schools commonly have full-time security staff, many schools do not have the requisite number of mental health staff (counselors, social workers, school psychologists, etc.) if they have any at all (Mann et al. 2019). Schools need to invest additional resources to address the complex and varied emotional needs of students, particularly as youth return to school with significant stress and trauma related to the COVID-19 pandemic. By prioritizing services that support mental health and well-being, schools are better positioned to address the root causes of behavioral issues that may escalate into school safety concerns if left unaddressed (Mann et al. 2019).

Implementing and Centering Policies That Highlight Equity

To ensure that school safety approaches are not only based on evidence-informed practices but are also appropriate for the needs of diverse student bodies, consideration must be given to facilitating equitable school safety.

Explicitly Addressing Systemic Inequities

Schools need to explicitly address the systemic inequities that exist in education (Galloway et al. 2019), which will not be easy and will take considerable time, resources, and buy-in from all school staff and a sustained commitment from school administration. Schools cannot effectively implement culturally sensitive and inclusive programming without first acknowledging the deeply rooted prejudices that exist in the U.S. education and criminal justice systems. In order to mitigate the pervasive effects of these deeply held beliefs, they need to be addressed at the systemic level. For instance, disciplinary discrepancies

attributed to beliefs that students of color are more disruptive or dangerous than white students cannot be solely addressed through policy; rather, they must also be addressed at an attitudinal level, through cultural sensitivity and bias-based training for all school staff who interact with youth, their families, and all school community members. Additionally, many commonly utilized school safety strategies are inherently harmful to students of color and may not reflect differences in cultural norms or beliefs. Schools must first recognize the role they play in perpetuating these unjust systems before they are able to make meaningful progress toward creating a fair, equitable, and safe school environment for all students.

Developing and Evaluating Programming With Equity in Mind

In addition to systemic inequities in schools, many programs for students, such as social-emotional learning, were developed and tested with white students and may not incorporate the needs of students of color in their current forms (Camangian and Cariaga 2021). Programs and policies specifically designed to address the safety needs of marginalized student populations are needed. Marginalized communities experience particularly high levels of stress and trauma, highlighting the need for targeted programming that addresses the unique lived experiences of these populations to facilitate the development of strong social and emotional skills and interpersonal relationships that are beneficial not only for safety but for education and individual well-being.

Elevating the Voices of Marginalized Groups

To address inequities and implement programming that is targeted toward marginalized students, it is important to elevate voices of those involved (Scott et al. 2017). Multidisciplinary teams should consist of varied school members who can reflect the diverse needs of the community. Students of color should be given a platform to discuss their experiences and make recommendations to improve their schools. Additionally, scholars of color both at the school level and within the fields of research and practice should be involved in conversations and development of best practices in school safety that are rooted in equity.

Staff Training

Finally, to support the mission of a comprehensive equity-centered school safety approach, all school staff must receive carefully curated training on the needs of a diverse student body (Astor et al. 2020). As systems, schools carry deep-seated prejudices that may also be present in staff. These beliefs must be identified and addressed through culturally competent and equity-focused training to facilitate a workforce that supports the school's goal of equity and inclusion. Additionally, as efforts to diversify the teaching profession increase, students may feel more comfortable reaching out for guidance or assistance, improving relationships, and minimizing school safety concerns.

Conclusion

School safety has been studied extensively for several decades. Research indicates that addressing school violence is complex because it is a constantly evolving phenomenon that must be rigorously examined and reevaluated. Every school has the responsibility and potential to provide all students with an environment where they feel physically and psychologically safe to learn and develop. Given the variability in school context and culture, relevant stakeholders (e.g., school staff, students, families) and data collection play an important role in developing a comprehensive school safety approach that centers equity. There is a need for additional research that rigorously evaluates alternatives to exclusionary and zero-tolerance policies and practices and the implementation of equity-focused policies.

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