# NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

## FIVE THINGS ABOUT

# COMPREHENSIVE APPROACHES TO SCHOOL SAFETY

Over the last 25 years, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have consistently recognized the need for a comprehensive approach to school safety. However, identifying the key components of a comprehensive approach and the ideal way to balance and implement those components has proved challenging. To address this challenge, the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI) awarded approximately $246 million in grants from 2014 to 2017 to support nearly 100 research projects on school safety. This fact sheet summarizes the findings from these CSSI projects to help schools identify and implement the components of a comprehensive framework for school safety, reflecting the diversity of programs and practices available for school safety and the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing them in America's schools.

## 1. A comprehensive framework for school safety balances evidence-based strategies for addressing school climate, student behavior, and physical security with consideration for the school's unique needs and resources.

CSSI research indicates that a comprehensive approach to school safety should balance schools' needs and resources with the best available practices for addressing three key components of school safety: school climate, student behavior, and physical security. A multidisciplinary school safety team can use data to guide decision-making, formulate a school safety action plan, select and implement programs, and monitor progress. The team can use a logic model to explain the connection between program activities and safety-related outcomes, which may help school staff and other stakeholders understand and appreciate the rationale for adopting a new safety-related program. During planning, teams should also identify and address any unique cultural contexts shaping the experiences of staff, students, and parents, such as high levels of childhood trauma or poverty.

## 2. A positive school climate benefits multiple student- and school-level outcomes, including academic achievement, behavior, and physical safety.

School climate refers to the norms, values, relationships, and organizational structure that influence people's feelings about a school. In a positive school climate, people care about and watch out for one another, and student discipline is administered fairly across all student subgroups. A positive school climate supports the student and staff relationships that promote healthy youth development, prevent problem behavior, and encourage reporting about

concerning behaviors. A positive school climate benefits students' academic performance and attendance rates and is associated with lower levels of bullying, victimization, substance use, suspension, fighting, and violence. As a critical strategy for building a safe school environment, schools should administer a climate survey to students, staff, and parents/legal guardians on an annual or biennial basis. The climate survey results can help schools identify and prioritize their safety-related needs, select evidence-based programs for addressing those needs, and monitor progress to provide accountability and inform planning.

To support this work, schools can seek out training and technical assistance on how to disseminate, analyze, and interpret climate surveys. To improve school climate, multi-component programs yield stronger effects than single-component programs. The benefits of a climate program can take time to appear and may depend on setting, resources, and implementation.

### 3. To proactively address the underlying causes of student behavior problems and school violence, schools should adopt a multi-tiered system of supports with a range of assessment tools, referral options, and disciplinary strategies.

Research consistently finds that a "get tough" or zero tolerance approach to student misconduct is ineffective and can damage school climate, impede academic progress, and create disparities across racial and ethnic groups. Instead, schools should rely on a continuum of responses to student behavior that seeks to address the underlying causes of misconduct, aggression, and violence (e.g., trauma, depression, anxiety), not just the symptoms. Schoolwide positive behavior and bullying prevention programs do not have to be costly or complicated and can provide a proactive and preventive approach to student behavior issues. Effective implementation of these programs requires school leaders' support, staff buy-in, and consistent application. Threat assessment and management provide tools for evaluating a student's risk for targeted violence and, when used effectively, may improve perceptions of school climate, reduce suspensions, and prevent violence. Current research is examining threat assessment's effect on student outcomes and its potential unintended consequences, such as disparities in threat assessment data by race/ethnicity and special education status. Future research should also examine whether threat assessment procedures can adequately evaluate risk.

### 4. Schools should be discerning when selecting physical security technologies, considering the research on both the effectiveness of the technologies and the potential unintended consequences for students.

There is limited research on the effectiveness of physical security technologies and practices in schools.[1] Widely accepted and reasonably sound physical security technologies and strategies in schools include emergency operations planning, lockdown drills, surveillance systems, and law enforcement collaboration. Schools can use a security assessment survey to evaluate their current physical security technologies and practices. The results from the assessment survey, along with information about the school's resources, capacity, and context, can guide the selection and implementation of new security measures. Research has found inconsistent evidence on the effect of school resource officers and other school-based law enforcement officials on school climate, student behavior, and physical security.[2] Some research has found that students described security measures as helping them feel safer in

school, yet an increased use of security cameras inside school buildings has also been associated with decreased perceptions of safety, equity, and support, perhaps due to students' concerns about their purpose. Regularly surveying school climate before, during, and after implementation can help schools better understand and track the effect of their security measures on perceptions of school safety.

### 5. Due to schools' limited resources and capacity, the implementation of school safety programs and practices often differs from guidelines, diminishing their impact.

The implementation of safety-related programs and practices proves challenging in schools facing competing demands, limited resources, and uneven staff buy-in. Schools need strategies for identifying and addressing common barriers to program implementation, such as staff readiness, student trauma, and school size or layout. CSSI studies identified several strategies for improving implementation fidelity:

- A readiness survey can examine school staff's motivation and capacity for adopting a new program or practice. Proactively addressing readiness barriers can improve buy-in and team functioning for delivering a comprehensive approach to school safety.

- Schools and researchers can use an implementation inventory tool to monitor and support program implementation at the system level.

- Training on safety-related topics should not rely on a one-and-done approach. Instead, school staff should receive ongoing training and technical support for delivering evidence-based programs and practices.

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**Learn more about CSSI and read the full report,** *Balancing the Components of a Comprehensive School Safety Framework: Findings From NIJ's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative Projects*, at NIJ.ojp.gov.

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[1] In fiscal year 2024, NIJ funded researchers at George Mason University to build evidence on the effects of school security equipment for school safety. National Institute of Justice funding award description, "The Impacts of School Security Equipment on Students and Schools," at George Mason University, award number 15PNIJ-24-GG-01048-STOP, https://nij.ojp.gov/funding/awards/15pnij-24-gg-01048-stop.

[2] Joseph M. McKenna and Anthony Petrosino, *School Policing Programs: Where We Have Been and Where We Need To Go Next*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, February 2022, NCJ 301592, https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/school-policing-programs-where-we-have-been-and-where-we-need-go-next.

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