Rethinking School Safety:
The Need for Justice Reinvestment in Colorado Schools

We have to fundamentally rethink safety by centering the social, emotional, and mental health needs of young people and providing schools and communities with the resources and supports necessary to address the root causes of their pain, trauma and isolation. Too often we prioritize and further embed law enforcement, surveillance technology, and other invasive security measures in schools in the name of keeping students safe. Funneling money to more police or armed school staff is not the answer to preventing violence in schools. We need to invest in counselors, social workers, restorative justice coordinators, community intervention workers and other supportive school staff that actually create safer schools.

- **There is no evidence armed personnel will make schools safer during a school shooting.** Armed police were present at Virginia Tech,[1] Columbine,[2] and Parkland,[3] but were unable to stop the violence. The majority of mass shootings end when the shooter decides to end them,[4] not by intervention by law enforcement. More police in schools creates the appearance of safety rather than actually creating truly safe schools. Armed personal do nothing to address the underlying root causes of school violence, and only makes students feel less safe and more isolated in school.

- **More police lead to more students being arrested for school discipline related incidents.** The primary function school police have served nationally and in Colorado is not to protect students from outside threats, but to criminalize the students they are supposed to be protecting. When police are in schools they tend to get involved in school discipline,[5] escalating incidents that might have been resolved by a trip to the principal's office into involvement in the criminal justice system. School police are sworn law enforcement officers who are almost exclusively trained and tasked with enforcing the criminal code.
  - Schools that reported[6] having sworn law enforcement officers on staff served 40% of students in the U.S.; however, those schools accounted for 68% of the school-based arrests. In other words, there were over three times as many arrests per student in schools with police on site than those that did not.
  - Nationally, in 2013-14, K-12 schools reported 69,782 school-based arrests (actual numbers are likely even higher). They reported 222,541 referrals of students to law enforcement.
  - In Colorado, in 2015-16, there were 1,245 school-based arrests and 5,482 police tickets (though 40% of law enforcement agencies did not report their data, as required by state law, so the number is likely substantially higher).
  - Two-thirds of all the students who were arrested or ticketed were ages 15 and under. One-third of the arrests and tickets (2,207) were of students in elementary or middle school.
  - According to the Colorado Department of Criminal Justice, the vast majority of students being brought into the juvenile justice system were for offenses that did not pose a serious threat to school safety (as evidenced by the fact that they were only given a ticket and thus allowed to stay on school grounds). The most common charges were related to marijuana, fighting, and disruptive behavior. Firearm offenses constituted a minuscule 0.2% of the incidents that resulted in arrests or tickets.

[1] Sherman, *How do we prevent school shootings?*, Politifact
[2] Kohn, *What Really Happened At Columbine?*, CBS News
[3] Rozsa, *Armed Sheriffs Deputy Stayed Outside Florida School While Mass Killing Took Place*, Washington Post
[4] U.S. Department of Justice, *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*
[5] Nance, *Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, University of Florida Levin College of Law
[6] Education Week Research Center, *Which Students Are Arrested the Most?*

- **Police presence disproportionately harms youth of color** who are arrested and referred to law enforcement than their white peers for the exact same behaviors. After the tragedy at Columbine High School within a predominantly white community, it was communities of color that subsequently bore the brunt of "zero-tolerance" school discipline and over-policing in schools. Hundreds of thousands of Black and Brown students have been criminalized by school police officers as a result.
    o Statewide, there were 3.6 times more arrests and tickets per Black student than there were per White student. There were 17% more arrests and tickets per Latinx student than there were per White student.
    o While school-based arrests and tickets are used unnecessarily all across the state, their use is overwhelmingly concentrated in districts with large numbers of students of color.
    o For example, the number of arrests and tickets per student at schools with more than 70% students of color was almost six times higher than it was at schools with under 20% students of color.

- **Instead of more police, schools need real solutions** on how to create positive, supportive learning environments that phase out law enforcement, not increase their presence. To dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and create safer, racially equitable schools, we need to rethink how we allocate our educational resources. This realignment should include restorative approaches to discipline, a divestment of resources from the criminalization infrastructure, and an investment in teachers, counselors, parent engagement and student support services.

- **Preventing violence in schools requires a proactive, holistic approach.** We need to reject such short-sighted and counter-productive approaches that increase police presence, and instead ramp up our efforts to build healthy, positive learning environments. We need to instead prioritize the root causes behind the pain, trauma, and isolation felt by so many young people.
    o Social and emotional learning and Restorative Justice[7] teach young people how to manage their emotions and respond to conflicts in healthy ways[8]
    o Counselors, wrap-around services and strong relationships with caring adults give struggling students the support they need.[9]

- **Rather than invest school security measures, we can invest in education professionals and young people themselves.** We can support programs and interventions that build school communities where there is mutual trust. Children with a strong connection to school staff do not bring weapons to school. When students feel a sense of attachment to their school, or to the adults within their school, they are more willing to report the presence of weapons. When schools focus on building key skills, improving school climate, and promoting healthy relationships they show marked reductions in violent outcomes.

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[7] Education Policy Center, *Creating Healthy Schools*
[8] Alternatives: Youth Shaping Positive Change, *Inspiring the Future: Case Study on Alternatives' Restorative Justice work at Paul Robeson High School 2014-2017*
[9] University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, *Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools: The Roles of Community Context and School Social Organization*
Other Source(s): Colorado Department of Public Safety, *Summary of Law Enforcement and District Attorney Reports of Student Contacts*