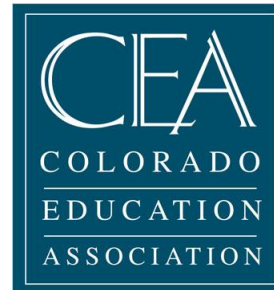


School Climate and School Safety

A Community Perspective



Executive Summary

On August 17, 2019 Padres & Jóvenes Unidos (Padres) and the Colorado Education Association (CEA) hosted a community focus group to discuss how school climate impacts school safety in Colorado. Community members, students, and educators gathered at a union hall in Jefferson County to share stories and discuss solutions.

The vision and ideas discussed at this focus group mirror the research consensus: schools that are integrated into the community and have adequate counseling and mental health resources will improve school climate, decreasing incidents of school-based violence. Creating a welcoming school environment, not target hardening, was the clear message of the focus group.

Background Information

In recent years, education scholars and policymakers have reached a consensus that making improvements to school climate and promoting social-emotional learning has a large impact on preventing incidents of violence in schools. Experts call for relationship-building, more counselors, schools that have strong community ties, threat assessment teams, a decrease in punitive discipline policies such as suspensions and expulsions, and an investment in restorative justice.¹ Allowing educators to carry guns is not one of the recommended policy changes.

Educator surveys conducted by CEA and its national affiliate, the National Education Association (NEA), echo the research consensus. 83% of NEA members would not carry a gun in school.² In Colorado, 86% of educators reported that they would feel less safe or no different if educators with gun licenses were allowed to carry guns in schools.

Methodology

CEA and Padres invited their members as well as the general community to a two-hour focus group to discuss the effects of school climate on school safety. During the meeting, attendees split into three groups to discuss how school culture contributes to the safety of schools. Attendees shared personal stories and were asked to discuss what makes their schools welcoming and what negatively impacts their school culture through the following questions:

- 1) Please think about one thing that makes your school “the place to be:” warm, welcoming, and engaging—a place that helps students and staff focus and engage.
 - a. What is it?
 - b. Why does it work?
 - c. How is it perpetuated?
- 2) Now think about one thing that increases stress, makes school harder, that destabilizes climate.
 - a. What is it?
 - b. Why does it work?

¹ <http://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/meta-analysis-child-development-1.pdf>; <http://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2017-META-ANALYSIS-SUMMARY-final2.pdf>; <https://curry.virginia.edu/prevent-gun-violence/>; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindadarlinghammond/2019/05/16/want-safe-schools-start-with-research-based-school-discipline-policies/#5df743286701>. Researchers also recommend policies unrelated to school climate, such as stricter gun laws, but this report is focused on the ways school climate influences school safety.

² [https://cgrcengage.com/nea/file/7MSOjs1IZFd/NEA-NR-Gun-and-School-Safety-Poll-\(FINAL\).pdf](https://cgrcengage.com/nea/file/7MSOjs1IZFd/NEA-NR-Gun-and-School-Safety-Poll-(FINAL).pdf).

- c. How is it perpetuated?
- 3) Thinking about these things: If we could only do ONE thing to make the climate/culture in our schools better, what should it be?
 - a. Why?



In groups, participants brainstormed a list of policies that could improve school culture. Attendees were then given five green dots and three orange dots and were asked to place green dots on their favorite ideas and orange dots on any ideas they were opposed to.

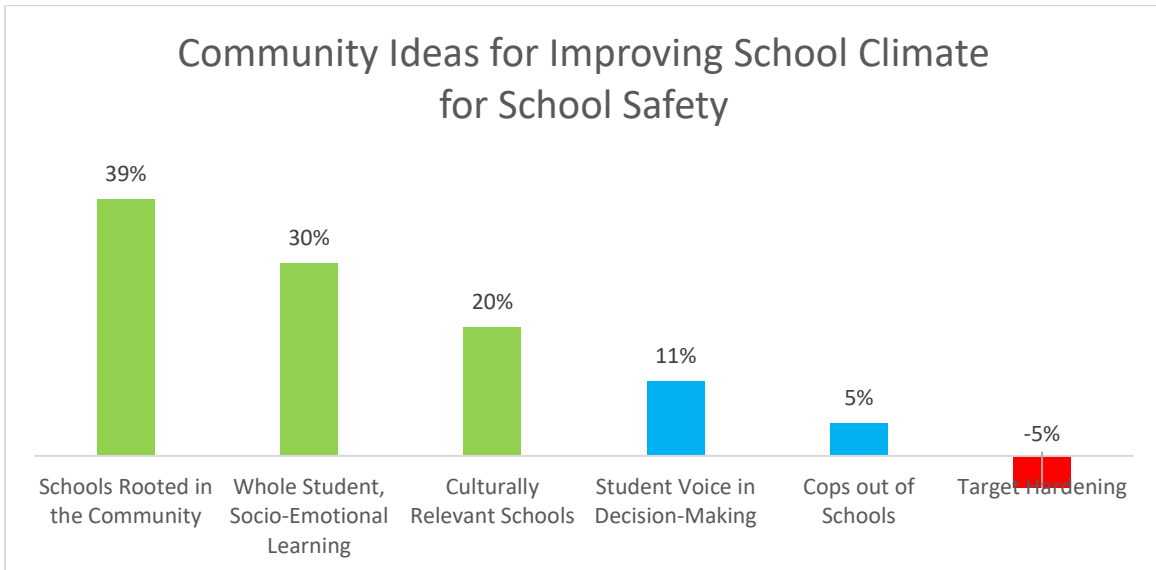


At the conclusion of the focus group, attendees discussed:

- 1) What has resonated most with you today?
- 2) If there were funds for “School Safety,” how do you think they should be spent to improve school climate and culture?
- 3) What are you ready to do to help improve climate and culture in your schools?

Results

To quantify participants' priorities, attendees were asked to place green dots on solutions they liked and orange dots on ideas they found problematic. Attendees favored ideas that integrate schools into the surrounding community.



Percentages were calculated by subtracting the number of orange dots from green dots and dividing by the total number of dots.

Schools rooted in the community include: community schools, restorative justice, wraparound services (including counselors, sex education, social workers, and psychologists), and needs assessments.

Whole student, socio-emotional learning includes: time to play and trauma-informed instruction.

Culturally-relevant schools include: staff population that reflects students, multilingual schools, and culturally-relevant curriculum.

Participants explained how their experiences have informed their ideas for improving school climate. Kathy Zaleski, a teacher in Adams 12, shared that implementing restorative practices improved the culture in her classroom. She described how restorative circles allowed students to understand classmates' perspectives and connect on shared experiences. She also mentioned that her focus on restorative justice means that students trust her help them solve inter-personal conflicts.

Lorena Limón, a Padres member and parent of five children, described her students' negative experiences with school discipline policies, sometimes resulting in interactions with police. Small issues quickly escalated due to a reliance on police to enforce rigid school discipline policies. She explained, "the environment in many of our schools is toxic and criminalizes students of color."

Recommendations

Educators and community members know that a positive school environment reduces the risk of violence in schools and promotes learning. Target hardening does not improve school climate and may increase students' fear and anxiety.

To cultivate welcoming school culture, Padres and CEA recommend:

1. Schools that are integrated into their community. Schools should be spaces where all members of the community feel welcome. Students should feel like their school reflects their community, and parents should be welcomed, not intimidated.
2. A focus on social-emotional learning. This means more counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals.
3. More opportunities for authentic engagement of community. Even though policymakers often focus school safety discussions on target hardening, community members did not bring up target hardening and physical security in the focus group. In fact, when target hardening tactics were brought up by facilitators, attendees, especially student participants, responded by saying these measures make students feel less safe. This focus group indicates that there may be a disconnect between policymakers' conversations about school safety and what community members and educators know is best for students.

Resources

Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, Rethinking School Safety, <https://padresunidos.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Justice-Reinvestment-Rethinking-School-Safety.pdf>

Forbes, Linda Darling Hammond, “Research based discipline”:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindadarlinghammond/2019/05/16/want-safe-schools-start-with-research-based-school-discipline-policies/#3a9f4fb86701>

FamiliesUSA trauma informed instruction:
https://familiesusa.org/sites/default/files/product_documents/FamiliesUSA_Help-Our-Children-Grow-And-Thrive_Report.pdf

NEA, AFT, Everytown report:
<https://everytownresearch.org/documents/2019/02/keeping-our-schools-safe.pdf/>

For additional information, see the Sandy Hook Commission report: http://www.shac.ct.gov/SHAC_Final_Report_3-6-2015.pdf

NEA school crisis guide:
<http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA%20School%20Crisis%20Guide%202018.pdf>

Education Next review of target hardening: <https://www.educationnext.org/protecting-students-from-gun-violence-does-target-hardening-do-more-harm-than-good/>

NEA, Addressing the Epidemic of Trauma in Schools:
<http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA%20Student%20Trauma%20Report%207-31.pdf>

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