



## Improving School Climate and Safety

Governors understand that ensuring the safety and well-being of children at school is of critical importance and that recent tragedies underscore the urgency with which they must act. In every state, students face daily threats at school from gun violence, bullying and cyberbullying, and unsafe buildings. Alone, school professionals simply may not have the time, training, or resources required to address the wide range of issues.

One way that governors can help is by supporting school-based efforts to improve climate and ensure that all students attend school in a safe and supportive environment. In a school with a positive climate, students are more likely to feel engaged, to achieve academically, and to develop strong developmental relationships.<sup>i</sup> They are also less likely to exhibit the problem behaviors that make schools unsafe like vandalism, gang activity, crimes, and bullying.<sup>ii</sup> This brief outlines several steps that governors can take.

### 1. Understand School Safety in Your State

Governors are in a unique position to ensure that state officials and school leaders have access to information and actionable data for a clear picture of the factors that affect school safety and climate across the state.

#### 1.1 Form or take advantage of an existing school safety task force or committee.

A task force is useful when an administration needs to demonstrate immediate action while gaining a better understanding of the current situation. Using the task force, study school staffing ratios, teacher professional development opportunities, and factors that make schools unsafe to identify the appropriate steps to address any issues at the state level. Ensure that the task force is a multi-disciplinary team that considers testimony from a wide-range of stakeholders - including from parents and students. The task force should meet on a regular basis within an established time-frame to produce reports with recommendations for action.

In Nevada, Governor Brian Sandoval formed the Statewide School Safety Task Force by executive order to review current law related to school safety and prepare recommendations related to bill draft requests, the Executive budget, and model policies for school districts. For resources and reports: [Statewide School Safety Task Force](#) published by the State of Nevada Department of Education

#### Learn More

[Caring Communities: Linking School Culture and Student Development](#) published by the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

[Understanding Child Trauma](#) published by the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative

[Research Brief: Social and Emotional Learning](#) published by Communities In Schools

[The Developmental Relationships Framework](#) published by Search Institute

#### 1.2 Introduce legislation that would require school districts to disaggregate data on student behavior and discipline rates.

Schools collect data on student discipline rates but may not analyze that data according to subgroups of students. National data show that significant disparities in school discipline rates affect outcomes for subgroups of students. For example, black students are more than three times as likely to be expelled or suspended than their white peers and students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than students without disabilities.<sup>iii</sup> Requiring disaggregation will give school leaders the tools to make data-driven decisions about this critical issue related to school climate.<sup>iv</sup>

### 1.3 Work with the state education agency to require school districts to include a non-academic needs assessment in Comprehensive Support and Improvement plans.

Under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA),<sup>v</sup> school districts must develop and implement plans for Comprehensive Support and Improvement<sup>vi</sup> that are based on a school-level needs assessment. To be most impactful, this needs assessment should examine both the academic and non-academic needs of the school. The non-academic needs assessment can provide actionable data and ensure that effective school improvement planning targets any school safety and climate issues that impede student learning. As part of the regulation, state education agencies can provide schools with a template for a comprehensive assessment.

Communities In Schools developed an assessment of students' social, emotional, and academic skills and competencies that is intended to give our site coordinators insight into these areas of students' lives. This assessment includes measuring students' feelings of belongingness at school and the amount of social support they feel they receive from family, peers, and teachers. For students who indicate that they feel they don't fit in or belong at school or that they have little support for others in their lives, site coordinators intervene.

### 1.4 Work with the state education agency to establish a School Safety and Crisis Line.

A crisis line provides a means for people to anonymously report unsafe, violent, or criminal activities at or near a public school. States use crisis lines as a place for individuals to report incidents of bullying, cyber-bullying, harassment, or hazing; physical or sexual abuse committed by a school employee or school volunteer; and for suicide prevention to individuals experiencing emotional distress or psychiatric crisis.

In Utah, the state legislature established the School Safety and Crisis Line. Called the SafeUT Crisis & Safety Tipline, it allows students at schools statewide to contact crisis counselors and report incidents through an app. For sample language: [Utah S.B. 175: School Safety and Crisis Line](#)

## 2. Improve Interagency Collaboration

Within their administrations, governors have access to a multi-disciplinary team of experts that can help solve the complex challenges associated with high-rates of trauma and poverty, but agency silos often create barriers to effective collaboration and alignment.

### 2.1 Form or take advantage of an existing Children's Cabinet.

According to [A Governors Guide to Children's Cabinets](#), a Children's Cabinet can focus the conversation on the needs of children and build a long-term commitment to solving the issues that affect children. Cabinets typically focus on a few critical issues and can bring together state resources and expertise across agencies to solve the difficult challenges. A Children's Cabinet can provide a mechanism for agencies to agree on core values, set common benchmarks, increase transparency between agencies, and help agencies develop a common language. Some Cabinets provide a cross-department "Children's Budget" for the governor.

In Virginia, a Children's Cabinet was established by Former-Governor Terry McAuliffe in 2014. Governor Ralph Northam re-formed the Children's Cabinet to focus on "early childhood development and school readiness, nutrition and food security, systems of care and safety for school-aged youth." Read: [A Governor's Guide to Children's Cabinets](#) published by the NGA Center for Best Practices

### 2.2 Explore opportunities to coordinate and align federal funding streams.

Braiding funds across a range of sectors – healthcare, public health, substance abuse, child welfare, juvenile justice, homeland security – can facilitate collaboration and lead to a stronger, more targeted, and sustainable allocation of resources. Federal programs like the Performance Partnership Pilot for Disconnected Youth (P3) and Now is the Time Project AWARE can provide an opportunity for states to improve outcomes with additional flexibility in the use of discretionary funds across multiple federal programs. ESSA also provides several opportunities for states and schools to braid federal funds with other funding sources, such as the Corporation for National and Community Service, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or Medicaid. Finally, explore federal Pay for Success grants as an opportunity to combine funds from both public and private sources by incentivizing private investments.

## **2.3 Direct the state health and education agencies to review the state Medicaid plan and ensure that schools can seek reimbursement for care for all students.**

For low-income students who face emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges, cost can be a barrier to receiving appropriate care from a licensed professional. In 2014, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) issued a regulatory change<sup>vii</sup> that allows states to use Medicaid funding to provide allowable services to all Medicaid-enrolled students in schools. But many states have provisions in their state Medicaid plans that are a barrier to expanding services to all Medicaid-enrolled students.<sup>viii</sup> Direct the State Medicaid Director to review the state Medicaid plan and related document (e.g., provider manual, managed care contracts) and amend any provisions that block schools from seeking Medicaid reimbursement for all students. Explore other opportunities to expand Medicaid mental health services in schools.

In Louisiana, the State Medicaid Director submitted a state plan amendment to CMS removing a provision that required students to have an Individualized Education Plan in order to receive care at school. The change allows schools to bill Medicaid for all allowable services provided to Medicaid-eligible children. View the amendment: [Louisiana Medicaid Plan Amendment](#)

## **3. Support Safe School Strategies and Community Partnerships**

Governors can take steps to ensure that school-based efforts to improve school climate are sustained and long-term. Governors can also use their platform to encourage schools to partner with youth-serving organizations, businesses, and universities to provide young people with access to basic needs and opportunities for recreation, health, and learning.

### **3.1 Introduce legislation to establish and fund integrated student supports as a strategy to improve school safety and climate.**

Integrated student supports is a school-based approach to addressing the interconnected challenges that affect the health and well-being of students.<sup>ix</sup> A high-quality model of integrated student supports can foster a supportive learning environment while linking students to services they need to thrive. A designated coordinator manages steps like the planning and integration of programming and resources, allowing teachers to teach and principals to focus on leading the school. The coordinator then leverages community-based resources to connect students and families with extra academic, social, health, and wellness support - all while creating and contributing to a climate of safety and trust.

In Massachusetts, the legislature adopted a framework for safe and supportive schools that enable students to develop positive relationships, regulate their emotions and behavior, achieve in school, and maintain physical and mental health. The Safe and Supportive Schools Commission developed a protocol for integrated student supports that defines the key components and outlines essential practices that ensure high-quality implementation. View the Massachusetts Framework: [Recommendations on Principles of Effective Practice for Integrating Student Supports](#)

### **3.2 Ensure that crisis response includes resources for schools to engage community partners and mental health experts to assist with recovery from trauma.**

Events like natural disasters or the death of a member of a school community can be particularly traumatic for young people. Community partners can help schools to reopen, provide long-term support, and help family members access recovery resources. Partners can also be leveraged to provide trauma-informed care training support and broker trauma support resources for adults in schools.

In Texas, Communities In Schools helped restore a sense of safety and stability after Hurricane Harvey. Texas affiliates assisted schools as they reopened and helped family members access community recovery resources. CIS site coordinators also provided training in trauma-informed care practices and helped adults access trauma support.

### 3.3 Explore federal pay for success grants to form public-private partnerships and leverage private investments.

The federal government is working on a variety of Pay for Success projects authorized by recent legislation, including ESSA, the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*,<sup>x</sup> and the *Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018*. Pay for Success is used to support evidence-based approaches and encourage private investment in initiatives that solve challenges like homelessness, workforce development, opioid misuse treatment, and child welfare. Public funds provide the incentive for private investment, but are paid only when measurable, positive outcomes are attained.

The U.S. Department of Education published a feasibility toolkit to help states and local entities explore whether this model is a good fit and engage partners in the planning process. View the toolkit: [Pay for Success Feasibility Toolkit](#)

## Conclusion

Students need and deserve to attend schools in which they feel safe and supported. That means that states must work with schools to address daily threats like gun violence, bullying and cyberbullying, and unsafe buildings. Governors can take these important steps to ensure that they implement effective solutions that consider the needs of children.

## About Communities In Schools

Communities In Schools works inside public and charter schools full-time, building relationships with students to empower them to stay in school and succeed in life. Working directly in more than 2,300 schools in 25 states and the District of Columbia, Communities In Schools serves nearly 1.57 million students every year.

We work with school leaders to implement an evidence-based model of integrated student supports. Integrated student supports is a school-based approach to addressing the academic and non-academic barriers that keep students from reaching success in school and in life. We position a site coordinator in each school to assess the needs of students in that school. The site coordinator then identifies and connects students to resources that meet these needs.

Through strategic partnerships with local providers, our site coordinators bring together various community supports to provide integrated services benefiting an entire student body (Tier I). Simultaneously, site coordinators work with school leaders to identify a subset of the most at-risk students, who then receive targeted and/or individualized interventions (Tiers II & III) based on their identified needs.

Research shows that this approach can lead to decreases in grade retention and dropout, and increases in attendance, math achievement, and overall GPA.<sup>xi</sup>

## References

<sup>i</sup> National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (2011). Making the case for the importance of school climate and its measurement [Webinar]. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/events/webinar/making-case-importance-school-climate-and-its-measurement>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (March 2014). Civil Rights Data Collection: Data Snapshot (School Discipline). Retrieved from: <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/downloads/crdc-school-discipline-snapshot.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Read more about the connections between student behavior and school climate: Darling-Hammond, L. & Cook-Harvey, C. (September 2018). Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from: [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Educating\\_Whole\\_Child\\_BRIEF.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Educating_Whole_Child_BRIEF.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Pub. L. No. 114-95 § 114 Stat. 1177. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/essa-act-of-1965.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> Under ESSA, states must identify schools for Comprehensive Support and Improvement, including the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, high schools with graduation rates less than 67 percent, and schools in which at least one subgroup is consistently underperforming. Districts will be responsible for developing plans to improve student outcomes in the identified schools, which must then be approved by the state.

<sup>vii</sup> Mann, C. "Medicaid Payment for Services Provided without Charge (Free Care)." Received by State Medicaid Director, 15 Dec. 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.medicaid.gov/federal-policy-guidance/downloads/smd-medicaid-payment-for-services-provided-without-charge-free-care.pdf>

<sup>viii</sup> Somers, S. (October 2016). Medicaid's "Free Care Policy:" Results from Review of State Medicaid Plans. National Health Law Program. Retrieved from: [https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/MedicaidFreePolicyCare.rev\\_d\\_10.20.pdf](https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/MedicaidFreePolicyCare.rev_d_10.20.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> Moore, K.A. (2014). Making The Grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports. Child Trends. Retrieved from: <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-07ISSPaper2.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014*, Public Law 113-128 (29 U.S.C. Sec. 3101, et. seq). Retrieved from: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-113publ128/pdf/PLAW-113publ128.pdf>

<sup>xi</sup> Moore, K.A. (2014).