

An Inclusive Approach to School Safety
**Collaborative Efforts to Combat the
School-to-Prison Pipeline in Denver**



POLICE EXECUTIVE
RESEARCH FORUM

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Finally, credit is due to PERF staff members who conducted the site visits, interviewed practitioners, and helped write and edit this publication, including Director of Technical Assistance Jessica Toliver, Senior Research Associate Lisa Mantel, Research Associates Maggie Brunner and Rachael Arietti, Research Assistant Adam Kemerer, and Director of Communications Craig Fischer.

Letter from the Executive Director of PERF

Violent incidents in America's public schools have prompted educators, parents, and policymakers to closely examine school environments and develop policies and practices to ensure the safety of the school community. While high-profile incidents, such as the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, have driven much of the national concern for school security efforts, a significant percentage of American students are subjected to violent conditions in their everyday school experiences.

In an effort to provide safer environments for students, many school districts around the country have partnered with law enforcement agencies to assign dedicated police officers (known as School Resource Officers) to schools to deter violence and to intervene in incidents that escalate beyond the control of educators. However, advocates across the country have expressed concern that SROs may inadvertently contribute to the "school-to-prison pipeline," in which minor behavioral issues in schools that would not ordinarily result in criminal charges are moved into the criminal justice system as a direct result of police involvement in managing student behavior. Incidents captured on video in Richland County, South Carolina,¹ and Baltimore, Maryland,² revealed uses of force by SROs that have drawn national attention, highlighting this issue.

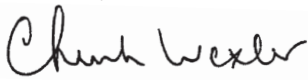
With such high stakes related to court involvement at an early age,³ law enforcement agencies and school administrators must ensure that removals from school by suspension, expulsion, or arrest are strictly options of last resort. Careful integration of SROs within a system of educators, service providers, and juvenile justice system partners may have the potential to ensure school safety and promote better educational outcomes for students.⁴

In February and March of 2016, PERF staff members traveled to Denver to observe the work of the Denver Police Department, Denver Public Schools, and several community-based organizations that have worked to improve outcomes for students in the Denver area. PERF staff had the pleasure of observing an innovative police/youth dialogue forum and conducting informational interviews with dozens of key stakeholders involved in the prevention and treatment of student behavioral issues. Through these observations and discussions, PERF has documented the activities of multiple government agencies and partner organizations collaborating in the Denver area to address the school-to-prison pipeline in this publication. Together, these stakeholders have each contributed to a city-wide effort to improve academic and professional outcomes for Denver students. The partnerships established between the Denver Police Department, Denver Public Schools, Denver Juvenile Probation, Denver District Attorney's Office, and community groups in the Denver area are a model for public safety collaboration in service of our youth population.

1. Yan, "South Carolina School Officer Fired."
2. Sanchez, "Baltimore School Officers on Leave."
3. Fabelo et al., *Breaking Schools' Rules*.
4. Canady, James, and Nease, *To Protect & Educate*.

This publication provides guidance to jurisdictions across the country that are looking to implement similar programs or improve upon existing programs. The officers, educators, and community stakeholders highlighted in this report have worked to increase the opportunities for all students in Denver. By taking an active role in preventing the potentially negative consequences associated with police intervention in schools, together we can address the school-to-prison pipeline and strengthen our communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chuck Wexler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chuck Wexler
Executive Director
Police Executive Research Forum

Executive Summary

Overview

The Denver Police Department (DPD), Denver Public Schools (DPS), and community organizations in the Denver area have built a collaborative approach to school safety and positive youth development designed to combat the school-to-prison pipeline.⁵ Together, these organizations advocate a comprehensive approach to safety in which schools' disciplinary policies avoid removing students from the classroom, social service providers are substantively included in ongoing safety efforts, and students within the juvenile justice system are included in youth engagement efforts. The goals are to establish positive relationships between students, faculty, school staff members, and school resource officers; prioritize student well-being; and involve police only as a last resort following efforts to de-escalate conflict.

Early indicators show that Denver's approach is working: In the last five years, rates of student suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement have declined despite a 6 percent increase in total student enrollment over the same period.⁶ From the 2012–2013 school year to the 2014–2015 school year, district-wide in-school suspensions declined by 35 percent, out-of-school suspensions by 15 percent, expulsions by 32 percent, and referrals to law enforcement by 30 percent.⁷ What's more, the total number of behavioral incidents reported to DPS declined by 9 percent over the same period, indicating that the number of potential safety risks to students has decreased following changes in policy and practice.⁸

Viewing these efforts holistically, this report identifies a number of promising practices and lessons learned that practitioners, policymakers, and researchers may consider when engaging with students around the country. This publication is organized into three main sections, each describing a major goal of the Denver program:

1. **Prevention**⁹ of violent or disruptive incidents by addressing student needs, effective classroom management, and relationship building
2. **Intervention** to address harm and provide a path forward when student conduct compromises community well-being and school safety
3. **Reengagement** to ensure the highest possibility of success for students who do become involved in the criminal justice system

5. *School-to-prison pipeline* is a term used to describe policies and practices in educational systems and criminal and juvenile justice systems that result in children being referred to the justice system for behavior that could be better handled by educational and social service agencies. NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, *Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline*.

6. Zubrzycki, "As Denver Public Schools Enrollment Booms."

7. Eldridge Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity, Denver Public Schools, in communication with PERF research team, February 29, 2016.

8. Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity, DPS (see note 7).

9. The Prevention section of this report is predominant, which reflects the stated priorities of numerous community stakeholders who emphasized that preventative work is crucial to avoiding the long-term negative consequences associated with removal from school and criminal justice involvement for as many students as possible.

Prevention

The Prevention section chronicles efforts of DPS, Denver's Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM), the DPD, the Youth Empowerment Support Services (YESS) Institute, and the Bridge Project to prevent negative student behavior that may precede juvenile justice system involvement.

DPS officials have undertaken a system-wide overhaul of disciplinary policies, introduced restorative practices to teacher and administrator training, provided additional mental health support for students, and implemented a home visit program to better engage with families. Notably, policy makers at DPS developed a discipline matrix and ladder (included in this publication as appendices B and C) that provide clear guidance to principals and teachers on progressive disciplinary responses to specific types of student misbehavior.

Denver's OIM has also contributed to efforts preventing student misbehavior by establishing *Bridging the Gap: Kids and Cops*, a series of forums in which youth and police officers engage in facilitated dialogue and are provided with training on rights and responsibilities, implicit bias, and other topics relevant to police/youth interaction. These forums have received overwhelmingly positive reviews by youths and officers.

To appropriately address and respond to student behavioral incidents, the DPD and the DPS Department of Safety have implemented a comprehensive intergovernmental agreement with DPS. This agreement encourages a culture of trust between students and officers and provides for training for school resource officers (SRO) and campus safety officers (CSO) to effectively interact with students.

Community youth engagement efforts from organizations such as the YESS Institute and the Bridge Project have also been a critical component to preventing youth involvement in Denver's juvenile justice system. These organizations help at-risk youth develop the necessary skills to succeed in life through positive engagement efforts such as peer mentoring and academic tutoring.

Intervention

The Intervention section details efforts of the DPD, DPS Department of Safety, the Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP), and components of Denver's juvenile justice system to employ safety measures in response to dangerous student behavior, address harm caused by such behavior, and divert students from the criminal justice system.

The DPD and the DPS Department of Safety provide extensive training and guidance for SROs and CSOs on how to effectively respond to students who pose a danger to themselves or others in school environments. While SROs and CSOs may use force if necessary, the Department of Safety's policy is to de-escalate situations by using verbal and non-verbal communication skills in order to resolve incidents peacefully. In addition, DPS personnel have made concerted efforts to employ restorative interventions that address and resolve negative student conduct while keeping students in the classroom.

For youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system, the Denver District Attorney's Office and the Denver Juvenile Municipal Court have established diversion programs to give youth offenders the opportunity to avoid adjudication for first-time, nonviolent offenses and connect them to appropriate support services. In addition, DPS offers a suspension deferral program designed to remove suspensions from official school records for first-time drug and alcohol offenders. This ensures that suspensions do not hinder students' admission to college.

It is also critical to involve community organizations when providing intervention services to young people. Organizations such as GRASP help gang-involved youth or those vulnerable to becoming involved with gangs by providing peer support and mentorship.

Reengagement

The Reengagement section documents efforts from the Promoting Academics and Character Education (PACE) community program, DPS, and Denver Juvenile Probation to connect with youth who have been involved in the court system and prepare them for future educational and professional opportunities.

The **PACE** program is a collaborative effort between DPS, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver, and Denver Public Safety Youth Programs that provides a 15-day curriculum designed to help middle school students develop life skills for academic success while reducing out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. The **DPS Office of Post-Secondary Readiness** also seeks to reengage with students before and after potential separation from school through alternative school options for students who experience academic or behavioral struggles in traditional schools.

For youth already involved in the court system, **Denver Juvenile Probation** manages multiple reengagement opportunities, such as the Law Enforcement Advocate program, which pairs court-involved youth with police officer mentors in order to reduce criminal recidivism. Denver Juvenile Probation also offers a Day Reporting Center for students separated from school.

Summary of Recommendations

In observing the Denver community's inclusive approach to school safety, the research team identified four key recommendations:

1. **Encourage school resource officers to engage with youth in neutral, nonthreatening situations and settings.** Officers repeatedly cited communication opportunities as crucial to improving their performance in school environments by establishing relationships and building trust. Promising practices include the following:
 - Hiring candidates who have experience working with youth and demonstrate a willingness to mentor students outside of an enforcement capacity
 - Assigning SROs to one school rather than splitting duties across several schools to establish strong relationships with students and staff
 - Using evidence-based training programs that provide officers with cultural competency, knowledge of the causes behind problematic youth behavior, de-escalation and crisis intervention techniques, and scenario-based training.
2. **Empower students, families, and victims to work collaboratively and determine the best path forward following student misconduct.** School and police officials can better address the harm caused by student misbehavior and avoid harsh consequences for student offenders by taking community and victim perspectives into account and working towards mutually beneficial, restorative resolutions to conflict. Promising practices include the following:
 - Employing full-time restorative justice coordinators in schools to effectively integrate restorative practices into existing discipline policy, which allows teachers and administrators to focus on academic priorities
 - Including all parties who have been harmed by student behavior in restorative interventions, including SROs and CSOs, so harm can be comprehensively addressed and discussed
 - Developing personalized intervention plans that focus on student needs, highlight strengths, and include long-term goals to improve student behavior and foster development of critical problem-solving skills.

3. **Monitor school discipline and juvenile justice data to avoid racially disparate and consequentially disproportionate outcomes.** Modifications to school discipline systems, SRO guidelines, and juvenile justice diversion programs in Denver include the following:
 - Creating a graduated system of discipline and assigning consequences for student offenses that are proportionate to the harm caused by the student's actions
 - Developing clear and concise disciplinary guidance that directs teachers toward classroom-level interventions for minor issues and reduces discretion that allows teachers to immediately resort to highly consequential punishments, such as suspension, without using more productive, helpful options
 - Tracking student discipline outcomes to identify disparities or overreliance on punitive measures, documenting the types of offenses for which students are most often removed from school, and ensuring that teachers and administrators are providing proportionate discipline responses to student misbehavior
 - Training teachers on school discipline policy implementation, classroom management techniques, de-escalation tactics, and the history of implicit bias in discipline referrals
 - Providing mental health support resources (including on-site specialized providers) in all schools to reduce barriers to access and establishing partnerships with outside providers where service gaps exist
 - Considering diversion for most first-time, nonviolent offenders and ensuring racially equitable access to diversion for youth who commit similar offenses.
4. **Comprehensively identify and address students' unmet needs by working collaboratively with community service providers.** Even when officers and school personnel proactively refer youth to service providers, student needs may still be unaddressed if providers do not effectively communicate back to the referring agency and other stakeholders to collaboratively determine the specific challenges facing individual students and develop a plan for convenient, accessible support. School, juvenile justice, and court officials should consider the following practices:
 - Screening youth for issues that can be addressed through support services
 - Involving parents in the intake process to better identify family-related issues
 - Using evidence-based risk assessment models to inform diversion plans and carefully explaining proposed plans to youth and families to ensure buy-in
 - Offering support services in school where possible so that they are easily accessible, especially for students in diversion programs
 - Referring court-involved youth to community intervention programs that teach youth how to productively engage with their communities

- Finding ways to reach out to gang-involved youth to ensure they have access to services and can consider alternative options to gangs (involving former gang members in these efforts to inform intervention strategies may provide credibility for youth considering alternatives to gangs)
- Using locations primarily used for after-school programming, such as Boys & Girls Clubs, to house daytime activities for students separated from traditional schooling
- Establishing partnerships between school district personnel, community organizations, and juvenile justice partners to refer youth to alternative education options where appropriate, including students who have dropped out of school or are exiting juvenile correctional facilities.

Conclusion

Denver's collaborative efforts to ensure school safety and promote positive youth development have yielded promising practices that may serve as a model for other school districts across the country. By using an inclusive community-wide approach, the DPD, DPS, Denver District Attorney's Office, and community organizations have developed school discipline policies, infused restorative practices, and established a network of service providers to address student misconduct and behavioral issues without resorting to overly punitive measures. With these tools, Denver officials are making significant strides in countering the school-to-prison pipeline and improving the likelihood of academic and personal success for all students.

Introduction

School-based law enforcement programs began around 1960 as a way to improve the relationship between local law enforcement and youth. Since then, school resource officers (SRO) have been deployed in districts all over the country with various goals.¹⁰ Following the Columbine, Colorado, shooting in 1999, students became more aware of violence in schools. In 2013, a national survey of American students in grades 9 through 12 found that 7.1 percent of students reported that they did not go to school on one or more days in the 30 days before the survey because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school.¹¹

To help improve the safety of school communities as well as to respond to zero tolerance statutes and policies implemented during the early 1990s, the Denver school district and police department worked together to embed police officers in middle and high schools. However, a negative result of SROs in school districts around the country is early involvement in the criminal justice system with associated negative educational and career outcomes. Law enforcement contact in schools via an SRO can increase youth involvement in the criminal justice system. A first-time court appearance during high school increases a student's chances of dropping out of school independent of involvement in delinquent behavior,¹² and an individual's number of juvenile arrests is correlated with future months of unemployment.¹³ Moreover, a study of students in Texas found that, even after controlling for other risk factors, a student's suspension or expulsion nearly tripled the likelihood of involvement in the juvenile justice system within the subsequent academic year.¹⁴

“Tremendous opportunities exist in our local schools to improve safety through the presence of School Resource Officers, and more importantly, the positive relationships they build with students—and the Denver Police Department is seeing solid results from our efforts. At its core, we are using community policing methods, but addressing the sometimes-complex issues surrounding students’ safety and positive educational and disciplinary outcomes requires partnerships and innovative programs. It’s worth every bit of effort to protect and enhance the lives of our community’s most valuable assets—its children and future leaders.”

—Robert C. White, Chief of Police, Denver Police Department

In Colorado, the Denver Police Department (DPD) partnered with Denver Public Schools (DPS) and community partners to apply community policing principles to law enforcement involvement in schools. Early indicators show that rates of student suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement have declined. For example, from the 2012–2013 school year to the 2014–2015 school year, the total number of behavioral incidents reported to DPS decreased by 9 percent; district-wide in-school suspensions declined by 35 percent, out-of-school suspensions by 15 percent, expulsions by 32 percent, and referrals to law enforcement by 30 percent.¹⁵ These declines took place despite a 6 percent increase in total student enrollment over the same period.¹⁶ This publication reviews efforts undertaken by government agencies and community organizations in Denver to address the school-to-prison pipeline. It is organized into three main sections: prevention, intervention, and reengagement.

10. NASRO, *SRO Management Symposium Course Manual*.

11. Kann et al., “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance.”

12. Sweeten, “Who Will Graduate?”

13. Wiesner, “Juvenile Deviance and Work Career Outcomes.”

14. Fabelo et al., *Breaking Schools’ Rules*.

15. Greer, Associate Chief for Student Equity and Opportunity, DPS (see note 7).

16. Zubrzycki, “As Denver Public Schools Enrollment Booms.”

School Resource Officers in Denver

As defined in the Denver Police Department's Operation Manual, School Resource Officers are "assigned to designated schools (within their respective district), assigned personnel act as a law enforcement liaison/consultant/representative with students, faculty, school administration, parents, and the school community. Where appropriate they provide coaching and mentoring. Their function is to provide support services to youth and educational organizations through the presentation of lectures, officer involvement within the educational system, consultations, use of police authority when appropriate, and a wide range of public relations efforts. School Resource Officers are not directly involved in the school administrative discipline process. School resource officers are governed by an [intergovernmental agreement] with DPS that determines their selection process and activities."^{*}

SRO Duties

"The High School/Middle School SRO will:

1. Differentiate between disciplinary issues and crime problems and respond appropriately.
2. De-escalate school-based incidents whenever possible.
3. Understand that the District has adopted a discipline policy that emphasizes the use of restorative approaches to address behaviors, and is designed to minimize the use of law enforcement intervention.
4. Enhance school safety on school grounds to help foster a safe and secure learning environment.
5. As partners with the District, when appropriate and to the extent that SROs are familiar with various City agencies or community organization; SROs may assist school staff and students with locating such City agencies or community organizations.
6. As partners with the District, when appropriate, SROs may assist with resolving law enforcement issues that affect the School District and the broader community.
7. Provide a positive liaison between the Police Department, the students, the school administration and the District security department.
8. Participate in meetings with school administration when requested by school administration during the SROs normal shift.
9. Officers making an arrest or writing a citation/summons to a student at school, at a school event, or on a school vehicle shall notify the school principal or the principal's designee in a reasonable time period, not to exceed the mandates set forth by state law.
10. Question students in a manner and a time when it has least impact on the student/suspect's schooling so long as the delay in questioning does not interfere with the effectiveness of an investigation."[†]

However, in a properly implemented SRO program, police agencies may benefit from giving students positive exposure to law enforcement personnel, especially when youth relationships with police might otherwise be strained. By applying community policing principles in a school setting, SROs who strive to develop positive relationships with school faculty, staff, and students—while minimizing the need for "hands on" intervention—have the potential to make students feel safe while serving as a mentoring resource to students.[‡] As schools and police departments across the country seek to effectively implement such programs, it is critical to examine existing efforts and identify lessons learned.

^{*} Denver Police Department, "Div II Organization," 5.

[†] City and County of Denver, *Intergovernmental Agreement*.

[‡] Fabelo et al., *Breaking Schools' Rules*.

The **Prevention** section focuses primarily on efforts coordinated by the DPD, Denver's Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM), DPS, and community partners. Specifically, this section highlights the OIM's *Bridging the Gap: Kids and Cops* program, an innovative series of facilitated police/youth dialogue forums that incorporates training for both officers and young people. This section next reviews prevention efforts implemented by police, safety officers, and the school system. The Prevention section concludes by highlighting the efforts of two community groups in Denver that conduct youth development work: the Youth Empowerment Support Services (YESS) Institute and the Bridge Project.

The **Intervention** section reviews safety measures that SROs and campus safety officers¹⁷ (CSO) can employ when students may be a danger to themselves or others and also discusses how SROs and CSOs can build trust with students. This section then examines restorative interventions facilitated by DPS, focusing on promising practices and lessons learned. The Intervention section also reviews three youth diversion programs: East High School's Suspension Deferral Program; Municipal Court Youth Diversion; and the District Attorney's State Court Youth Diversion Program. This segment concludes with an overview of the Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP), a peer-run community intervention program.

The **Reengagement** section focuses on programs aimed at students who have been suspended or expelled from school, involved with the criminal justice system, or both. This section highlights three unique programs: Promoting Academics & Character Education (PACE), the Law Enforcement Advocate (LEA) program, and the Day Reporting Center.

This publication concludes with a summary of four key observations about Denver's efforts to combat the school-to-prison pipeline. Jurisdictions seeking to implement similar programs may benefit from applying comparable prevention, intervention, and reengagement efforts within their own communities.

17. School resource officers are police officers assigned to work in schools and are responsible for handling criminal complaints within the school. See Dignity in Schools Campaign, *A Model Code*. Campus safety officers provide security services and are responsible for preventing, intervening, and resolving disruptive activity that does not rise to a criminal nature. See Department of Public Safety, "Campus Safety Officers (CSO)."



Section I. Prevention

Efforts to Prevent Justice System Involvement in Response to Negative Behavior in Denver Public Schools

Achievement of the Denver school district's academic goals depends on the ability to provide all students with a physically and emotionally supportive learning environment. Students with mental health issues or disabilities may act out or misbehave in a way that disrupts learning for themselves and others. Students may have an individualized education plan (IEP) or unaddressed issues, but in either case, negative behaviors may be displayed. For example, according to the 2013–2014 U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection, students with disabilities served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act are more than twice as likely as students without disabilities to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions.¹⁸

Students often have problems at home that carry over into the school day and impact their ability to focus and succeed in a traditional school setting. Finally, a lack of academic engagement or lack of academic success can result in negative student behavior. If underlying student needs are not appropriately addressed by staff or are exacerbated by dismissive reactions from school personnel, schools may unintentionally contribute to situations in which minor behavioral incidents escalate into dangerous activity, threatening the safety of the school community.

In order to serve students exhibiting problematic behavior and prevent disruptive incidents from occurring, Denver Public Schools (DPS) officials advocate taking a “whole child” approach to education. Applied to student discipline, this approach eschews school discipline strategies that rely on removal from school (such as suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement), because such remedies exclude students from engaging with support services available to them in school. Instead, Denver schools take an inclusive approach to behavioral issues that is designed to address underlying problems and prevent harmful behavior, while keeping all students in the classroom.

Full implementation of a whole child approach to discipline requires both prevention and intervention efforts. Prevention involves providing services to help students improve their behavior and avoid sanctions such as removal. Intervention measures focus on restorative approaches that address harm caused by negative behavior, while reducing reliance on punitive measures. DPS administrators have made efforts to guide teachers on restorative classroom management and

Chronology: Major Events in School Discipline and Safety Programs in Denver

2007: Initial pilot of restorative discipline approaches in selected Denver Public Schools.

2008: Introduction of current disciplinary matrix and ladder from administrators at Denver Public Schools.*

2012: Colorado passes the “Smart School Discipline” bill,[†] following organizing efforts by Padres and Jóvenes Unidos and other community groups.

2013: Denver Public Schools and the Denver Police Department sign a new intergovernmental agreement laying out the responsibilities of law enforcement officers operating in schools.

2013: The Denver Office of the Independent Monitor begins preparation and planning for the Youth Outreach Project, *Bridging the Gap* Forums, to address communication issues between youth and police officers.

* Denver Public Schools, “Discipline Matrix;” Denver Public Schools, “Discipline Ladder;” Denver Public Schools, *Policy JK-R*.

† The school discipline bill requires additional training for law enforcement in schools and more detailed reporting of school discipline outcomes. Colorado State Senate, *A Bill for an Act Concerning Disciplinary Measures*.

18. Office for Civil Rights, *2013–2014 Civil Rights Data Collection*.

de-escalation strategies, connect students to mental health resources, and engage with families to identify student needs and future goals. Through a “disciplinary matrix and ladder” system implemented in 2008, Denver school administrators developed clear guidance on how teachers and administrators should respond to specific school-based offenses, ranging from low-level behavior such as dress code violations to mid-level offenses such as various types of thefts to the most serious offenses such as assault, weapons possession, and robbery.

To supplement this policy, administrators established a disciplinary culture focused on restorative approaches to classroom discipline and provided training to teachers on de-escalation techniques designed to avoid the need for more involved restorative interventions.

Overhauling the disciplinary process

Like other school districts around the country, DPS reported a rise in suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement in the early 2000s. Between the 2000–2001 and 2003–2004 school years, the number of out-of-school suspensions in DPS increased from 9,846 to 13,423—a 36 percent increase in suspensions while the student population increased by just 2 percent over the same period.¹⁹ Of special concern to community advocates fighting the school-to-prison pipeline, referrals to law enforcement from DPS increased by 71 percent over this period.²⁰ As the negative consequences of removal from school became clear, especially in communities of color that were disproportionately impacted, community groups such as Padres and Jóvenes Unidos (Parents and Young People United) began to press DPS officials to find alternative strategies to removal from school that would help students in need while addressing harm caused by problematic behavior.

With help from community partners, officials at DPS began to reevaluate discipline strategies and develop more specific guidelines for teachers. Simply stating that “removal from school should be a last resort” did not provide clear guidance to teachers and school administrators about what to do in a wide range of situations. Thus, policy makers designed a comprehensive discipline “matrix and ladder” to offer teachers and principals useful guidelines on which behavioral offenses warranted punitive responses and which offenses should be treated with classroom-level interventions. In 2008, officials published initial versions of the discipline matrix and ladder that, with minor revisions, are used in Denver schools to this day.²¹

“There wasn’t anything like a clear-cut ladder or matrix before 2008,” said Dr. Eldridge Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity at DPS. “A lack of a ladder and matrix made it more challenging for teachers to be aware of and use strategies other than suspension for misbehavior.”

The matrix and ladder created a graduated system of discipline assigning consequences for student offenses that are proportionate to the harm caused by the student’s actions. The matrix and ladder, each of which is a clear and concise one-page document, are designed to be used in tandem.

The discipline matrix classifies various types of student misbehavior into six different categories, depending on the severity of the offense, with the most harmful “Type Six” offenses requiring a mandatory expulsion hearing and referral to law enforcement by statute.²² (Type Six offenses are for firearms on school grounds.)

19. Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, Southwest Youth Collaborative, and Children & Family Justice Center of Northwestern University School of Law, *Education on Lockdown*.

20. Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, Southwest Youth Collaborative, and Children & Family Justice Center of Northwestern University School of Law, *Education on Lockdown*.

21. Denver Public Schools, “Discipline Matrix;” Denver Public Schools, “Discipline Ladder;” Denver Public Schools, *Policy JK-R*.

22. Denver Public Schools, “Discipline Matrix;” Denver Public Schools, “Discipline Ladder.”

The discipline ladder prescribes six levels of restorative, therapeutic, and administrative interventions that teachers and administrators can use to address the harm caused by the student misbehavior, identify, and respond to unmet student needs and ultimately prevent future incidents from occurring.²³ Level A, the first level, includes giving the student an opportunity to tell his or her side of the story and providing counseling. Moving up the ladder, interventions include notifying parents; obtaining assistance from a social worker, psychologist, or other service provider; formal documentation of interactions and interventions; administrative conferences with parents; and various levels of suspensions.

The system is designed to guide teachers towards classroom-level interventions for minor issues and to remove some of the discretion that previously allowed teachers to move straight to highly consequential punishments, such as suspension, without using more productive, helpful options.

Early indicators show a promising trend away from student removal for minor offenses. Since Padres and Jóvenes Unidos began tracking suspensions and expulsions across Denver in the 2010–2011 school year, removals from school have declined across the city. In 2010–2011, 7,766 students were suspended in school, 8,892 were suspended out of school,²⁴ and 105 were expelled.²⁵ In 2014–2015, each of these discipline outcomes declined even as DPS enrolled a greater number of students—just 2,980 students were given in-school suspensions, 4,446 were given out-of-school suspensions, and 49 were expelled.²⁶

Over the same period, referrals to police declined as well. After the 2013 implementation of an intergovernmental agreement between DPS and the DPD, referrals declined from 545 in the 2012–2013 school year to 384 in the 2014–2015 school year. “We have a very clear and common interest with the Denver Police Department,” said Dr. Greer. “They want to engage with kids who are involved in serious, chronic offenses, not disruptive or defiant behavior that should be kept with school principals.”

The matrix and ladder, in combination with larger efforts to implement restorative justice approaches in Denver public schools, have helped instill a culture in which teachers first turn to classroom-level interventions or service providers first before turning to principals or security officers to mete out discipline. “We don’t want school administrative discipline to be the first line of defense,” said Assistant Principal Jann Peterson at East High School. “You want to look at other explanations before putting the hammer down.”

In practice, teachers are more inclined to connect students to services that are available in the schools or outside of school now that the option to suspend is less accessible. For example, more teachers have been identifying students who act out as a direct result of enrollment in classes that do not fit their academic needs. School administrators address the problem behavior by transferring the students to more appropriate classes.

Infusing restorative practices in classroom management

Restorative approaches are a powerful tool to redirect negative student behavior. Restorative approaches and interventions include the use of “affective statements” (personal expressions of feelings in response to other people’s behavior), restorative dialogue sessions, and group-based discussions called peace circles²⁷ to address student behavior issues. Restorative dialogue techniques aim to quickly refocus students who are exhibiting negative or mildly disruptive behaviors in the

23. Denver Public Schools, “Discipline Matrix;” Denver Public Schools, “Discipline Ladder.”

24. In-school suspension occurs when a student is removed from the classroom but required to stay in a separate staffed room for a specific length of time, either for part of a day or for several days. Out-of-school suspension occurs when a student is removed from the school environment for up to 10 days. Blomberg, “Effective Discipline for Misbehavior.”

25. Zubryzcki, “Racial Disparities.”

26. Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity, DPS (see note 7).

27. Various types of peace circles implemented in Denver are discussed in the sidebar “Examples of Restorative Interventions Practiced in Denver” on page 47.

classroom. This technique teaches students to recognize their own behavior as problematic and find solutions rather than having teachers rigidly enforce rules. By focusing on positive resolutions to petty misbehavior, restorative dialogue can effectively address minor problems at the classroom level before they escalate into more serious issues.

Initially implemented as part of a pilot program, restorative approaches are now widespread in Denver schools, with 43 full-time restorative justice coordinators employed by individual schools across the district. Restorative justice coordinators are tasked with assisting teachers and administrators in planning and conducting restorative interventions for students. Restorative approaches to discipline in DPS are tailored to each local school environment, while sharing a common focus on repairing conflicts and addressing harm caused by problematic behavior. As schools have gradually shifted away from traditional punishments towards more restorative options, they have seen a decline in suspensions, requests for expulsion, and calls for service by police.

Successful integration of restorative approaches within a school's discipline framework largely depends on school administrators' efforts to incorporate restorative practices into the school's culture. Many administrators described a restorative approach to school discipline not as a set of techniques but rather as a general philosophy on how to respond to disruptive behavior and how members of a school community should interact with each other.

"It revolves around principals," said Dr. Greer. "If principals proactively create a culture of repairing relationships, it reduces the need to suspend students. Teachers then start to consider these approaches because they can see the benefit to their classrooms." Greer also noted that restorative practices do not require an expensive curriculum to teach, and they effectively serve as a reminder to take an empathic approach to student engagement. To date, Denver schools have experienced promising improvements in student behavior by encouraging restorative solutions to conflict, and the district plans to expand the approach by employing full-time restorative justice coordinators at every school in the Denver area.

"For restorative justice to take hold in schools, it needs to be more of a philosophy than a policy. If you try to operationalize this approach without addressing the mindset required to carry it out, you're less likely to be successful."

—Diane Ulmer, Dean of Multi-Tiered System of Supports and social worker at North High School

Training resources for teachers

DPS provides principals, deans, and other personnel in charge of discipline (collectively referred to as "discipline building leaders" within DPS)²⁸ with training on how to teach classroom teachers to apply the student discipline matrix and ladder to classroom incidents, how to recognize biased decision-making rooted in race, and how to de-escalate student behavior in the classroom. Integrated within the rigorous training curriculum DPS provides to new teachers, these training resources are designed to prepare school personnel in charge of discipline to implement discipline policies to increase the likelihood of positive resolutions to student misbehavior. Discipline strategies in DPS are classified within three categories:

1. **Administrative**, in which consequences are imposed *on* students, such as after-school detention
2. **Restorative**, which are interventions conducted *with* the student, such as restorative dialogue and classroom peace circles
3. **Therapeutic**, which are interventions conducted *by* the student, including substance abuse treatment and mental health counseling²⁹

28. Dr. Barbara Downing, District Partner at Denver Public Schools, in communication with PERF research team, June 22, 2017.

29. Denver Public Schools, *Policy JK-R*.

In determining which type of discipline strategy or combination of strategies is most appropriate for each student, school personnel in charge of student discipline are asked to consider a number of factors, including a student's age, prior conduct, and willingness to repair harm and the incident's overall impact on the school community. Above all, trainers at DPS emphasized that discipline consequences should be reasonable and proportionate to the severity of the offense.

The lowest level of offenses on the student discipline matrix are Type One; these incidents are handled in the classroom by the classroom teacher. They include misbehavior such as classroom disruptions, tardiness, use of profanity, dress code violations, minor defiance, and minor damage of school property.³⁰ For these types of offenses, the discipline ladder indicates the steps for a classroom teacher to address the incident. Each step has a restorative component. "We train discipline building leaders on the interventions that address Type One misbehavior, which can be handled in the classroom. The discipline building leaders take these interventions into their schools and share them with the teachers. Using interventions at the classroom level allows a behavior to be addressed before escalating to a level that would necessitate the intervention of a discipline building leader," said Dr. Barbara Downing, District Partner for Denver Public Schools. Teachers participate in training sessions led by principals or other personnel in charge of discipline in their schools that guide them to respond to minor misbehavior at the classroom level with supportive interventions. Classroom teachers receive a variety of professional development sessions throughout the school year instructing them in the techniques to address student behavior.

Teachers receive live, in-classroom guidance from coaches via wireless earphones. Once teachers have completed initial training and moved into the classroom, Denver participates in a program called "No-Nonsense Nurturer" to provide ongoing instruction on classroom management. The program, developed by the Center for Transformative Teacher Training and offered around the country, provides real-time coaching to teachers in the classroom. Teachers participating in the program first receive an introductory instructional program. Trained instructors then communicate to teachers during lessons through a wireless earphone.³¹ Afterward, the teacher sits down with the coach to debrief and review performance. The program was praised by DPS officials as an effective way to give teachers feedback on teaching strategies and classroom management techniques.

"What we hear from teachers is, 'Don't give us theory, help us with strategies in the moment to meet the needs of our students,'" said Dr. Greer. "In addition to improving classroom management generally, it really helps to address the issue of implicit bias, because the real-time coach can see where implicit bias might come into play more easily than the teacher can in the moment."

Implicit bias training. As Dr. Greer and other DPS officials noted, producing equitable discipline outcomes is a top priority in teacher training initiatives. Even as teachers and administrators increasingly rely on restorative and therapeutic approaches rather than punitive measures, racial disparities remain in the school's discipline outcomes and continue to present issues for Denver Public Schools. As a district, Denver Public Schools strives to limit suspension to a 0–3 percent out-of-school suspension rate for all students, including students in demographic groups that are frequently overrepresented in removal from school.

"When I took over our discipline reform work, there was a sense that disparities in suspensions were just due to disparities in behavior, and it was out of adults' control," Dr. Greer said, adding that African-American students were almost three times as likely to be suspended out of school as White students at the time. "We partnered with the University of Denver

30. Denver Public Schools, "Discipline Matrix."

31. For example, if a student exhibits disruptive behavior, the coach can provide the teacher with specific strategies to quickly engage the student, remain calm, and resume classroom instruction. CT3, "Real Time Teacher Coaching."

to investigate whether or not that was actually the case, and we found that kids of all races engage in behavior that's very similar. However, students of other races get punished for those similar behaviors very differently. After seeing those statistics, colleagues in the district became much more focused on how to keep all kids in school and ready to learn.”³²

The DPS Division of Student Equity and Opportunity trains personnel responsible for student discipline on the implementation of district discipline policies, including how implicit bias³³ (also known as “unconscious bias”) may affect school disciplinary decisions. Initially, there was pushback against the training by a staff member who was uncomfortable with the open conversation about race and unconscious bias affecting discipline decision-making at the school level. But implicit bias training is not about blaming or finger-pointing. Rather, it is about teaching people to understand that everyone has unconscious biases, and some of these biases can be harmful. The task is to recognize and manage our personal biases.

“The first reaction of a discipline building leader was to become acutely and uncomfortably aware of the possibility of the impact of racism on discipline decision-making” said Dr. Downing. “But after the discipline building leader worked with the data and understood the expectations for the practice of student discipline, the initial reaction turned to support the new way of examining the data and meeting the district expectations.” Many school faculty members in charge of discipline have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to have honest conversations about race and ethnicity, and they recognize the potential for problems arising from systemic issues that educators must work to address. Officials recommend framing racial disparities as a systemic issue to which educators can respond, rather than a problem limited to individual teachers. “We’re educators, and we know that learning is a lifelong event,” said Assistant Principal Jann Peterson at East High School. “You have to be able to reflect and listen to feedback. We’re not quite where we want to be with racial disparities, and everyone is working to address that.”

De-escalation training. Recognition of the potential for implicit bias is a prerequisite to Denver’s de-escalation training for teachers, which relies on teacher self-awareness to effectively resolve disruptive situations—or in more serious incidents to maintain safety until an SRO or a CSO arrives at a classroom. The basic de-escalation course is a two-hour training provided to every school. The training focuses on basic elements of de-escalation and trains teachers to serve as a calming presence until officers or other school support staff with more intensive intervention training can arrive to a classroom. “We modified the training to cover basic components and understandings of de-escalation,” said Jim Meskimen, who provides this training for all teachers in Denver and is currently an Associate Partner for Special Education at DPS. “There is no complicated information or lingo, and teachers can take elements of this and immediately apply it to the classroom.”

The curriculum prompts teachers to focus on three major areas as they prepare de-escalation responses: cultural responsiveness, self-awareness, and application of de-escalation techniques.

In discussing **cultural responsiveness**, teachers must be aware of how their own identities and cultural upbringing may strengthen or weaken potential connections to a student in need. For example, a teacher who grew up in the same neighborhood as a struggling student may be able to relate to the challenges facing the student and use that knowledge to intervene in the moment.

The **self-awareness** component of the curriculum is focused on immediate circumstances and context surrounding the situation at hand. In this section, Meskimen trains teachers to ask themselves questions that help them to decide whether or not to intervene and how to effectively interact with an agitated student.

32. Data indicated that Black, Latino, Multiracial, and Native students were significantly more likely than other students to be referred to the administrative office for behavior problems independent of their reasons for office referral over the course of the school year. Anyon et al., *Denver Public Schools Accountability Report*.

33. Explicit bias generally refers to bias based on animus toward a particular racial or ethnic group, whereas implicit bias refers to bias “outside of conscious awareness.” For further discussion on implicit bias as it relates to police, see Fridell, “Can Better Training Solve Cops’ Implicit Biases?”

The session ends with a review of **de-escalation** techniques based on a program developed by Geoff Colvin, a national expert on school safety and violence prevention.³⁴ This section includes video demonstrations of common middle school and high school scenarios that teachers may encounter and de-escalation techniques applicable to those situations.

“It’s all about addressing the behavior, rather than labeling the student,” said Meskimen. “We want to prepare teachers for common incidents they might encounter.” The training also addresses how to calm other students present during the encounter before the teacher, officer, or other school staff member addresses the agitated student in question. Above all, the training focuses on how teachers can maintain safety for all members of the school community involved in potentially dangerous situations, while making measured attempts to de-escalate. “Safety is the number one thing you have to provide a classroom teacher,” said Assistant Principal Peterson. “We give them guidance on how to be proactive and prevent dangerous situations from developing.”

DPS training on discipline policy implementation, restorative practices, implicit bias, and de-escalation is designed to prepare teachers to handle discipline issues in the classroom and only use administrative or law enforcement resources as a last resort if other methods have failed to produce improvements. A new, restorative philosophy has taken hold in schools across Denver as teachers see the positive effects of new discipline practices on student behavior. “We had a lot of pushback that our reform efforts could lead to creating unsafe schools that left kids unaccountable,” said Dr. Greer. “But after trying this, people have really supported it. We want to move away from the ‘suspension and expulsion model’ and we want to interrupt the school-to-discipline-to-dropout trajectory.”

Mental health support resources for students

It is critical that students who may be experiencing unaddressed mental health issues receive support services either in school or through referrals made through school resources. As a matter of student discipline, offering health resources and support to students is necessary to provide restorative and therapeutic solutions to behavioral issues that in the past were addressed with administrative remedies such as suspension and expulsion. More importantly, connecting students in need to services is a cornerstone of a compassionate approach to education that prioritizes student well-being.

Recognizing this need, the Denver public school system provides students with a number of support services that students can approach on their own or through the reference of a teacher, administrator, or safety officer. “We have a school psychologist, school social worker, school counselor, and/or school nurse in every school who can assist teachers in social and emotional learning,” said Dr. Greer. Students also have access to certified and licensed school counselors, each of whom has a minimum of a master’s degree in school counseling and is highly qualified to support students’ educational and personal concerns.³⁵ “We want all students to be able to address their academic, physical, social, and emotional health needs,” noted Greer.

Confidential services for students 15 or older. In addition, Denver has 18 school-based health clinics provided through a partnership with Denver Health that all students can access, even if they do not attend the school in which a health clinic is housed.³⁶ The clinics have supplementary resources that students can use, including a nurse practitioner, a full-time substance abuse therapist, a Medicaid enrollment specialist, and a full-time therapist. For students age 15 (the age of consent for mental health services in Colorado) and older, schools can also provide services without waiting for approval

34. A sample of Colvin’s work can be found at Sage Publishing, “Geoffrey T. Colvin Behavior Associates.”

35. Denver Public Schools, “Welcome to the DPS Counseling Resources Website.”

36. Denver Health is a safety net healthcare organization in Denver that provides healthcare personnel to Denver Public Schools health clinics. More information about Denver Health can be found at Denver Health, “About Denver Health.”

from a parent or guardian. Having confidential services available is critical for many students who, because of social stigma or other limitations, may not want to disclose their use of mental health services to friends or family. School social workers are also available to identify student issues and connect students to the specific resources that would be helpful to them.

“We are available to respond to student safety issues or any kind of crisis that would be a barrier to a student’s access to academics,” said Diane Ulmer, Dean of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and social worker at North High School. “Whether it’s suicidal ideation, child abuse, homelessness, or any other issue, we are available to speak with students and connect them to resources.”

The Denver public school system also has established partnerships with service providers outside of school for students who require more involved treatment options. Even at schools with substantial in-school options, some students’ needs may go beyond an in-school service provider’s capacity to treat individuals while simultaneously caring for an entire student community. For example, several Denver area schools partner with Project PAVE (Promoting Alternatives to Violence Through Education), a domestic violence victim advocacy organization, and four schools have expanded this partnership to house Project PAVE counselors within school buildings.³⁷

As a whole, Denver teachers, administrators, and service providers have worked to identify student needs and provide services to respond to ongoing issues and improve student well-being. By making officers, teachers, and students aware of such services through regular updates from school administrators, school support personnel aim to create an extensive referral network within schools to ensure that students are connected to critical resources.

Office of Family and Community Engagement home visit program

The Office of Family and Community Engagement (FACE Office) at DPS has created an extensive teacher home visit program as part of its efforts to empower Denver families. Based on a national, evidence-based model called the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project, Denver’s home visit program is designed to foster ongoing relationships and partnerships between educators and families.³⁸ Evaluations of the national model have found that it is associated with improved student attendance, increased parental involvement, improved academic outcomes,³⁹ and lower rates of discipline referrals.⁴⁰ In Denver, where the home visit program has expanded from five schools at the program’s initial implementation in 2010 to 78 schools in the 2015–2016 school year, FACE Office personnel have observed that the number of home visits conducted at a school is positively associated with overall school academic performance, and Denver teachers have reported positive changes in student behavior following home visits.

To join the FACE Office home visit program, Denver schools must commit to training and supporting teachers conducting visits. Teachers seeking to participate in the program are required to attend a two-hour training session provided by the FACE Office, which provides guidance on general protocols for arranging visits, how to make families feel at ease, implicit bias, and other challenges that teachers may encounter. While teachers generally initiate contact to plan visits with families, all students are eligible and parents may request visits directly. Information about the program is advertised through district-wide events, local media, partner community organizations, and flyers distributed at school.

37. Project PAVE, “Project PAVE.”

38. Parent Teacher Home Visits, “Parent Teacher Home Visits.”

39. Sheldon and Jung, *The Family Engagement Partnership*.

40. Lee, *The Research and Their Stories*.

After establishing expectations for the visits through phone conversations with families, teachers conduct visits in pairs, either in the family's home or—by the family's choice—in a public place outside of school grounds. The visits, which last between 30 minutes and one hour, are built around establishing the family's goals for the student. As laid out in the national model for the Parent Teacher Home Visits program, centering conversations explicitly on a family's "hopes and dreams" can demonstrate that teachers care about student well-being and give families the opportunity to provide information that will help teachers personalize instruction to a student's interests.⁴¹ "It's the first time that many parents have had someone ask them what they want for their child," said Yoni Geffen, District Coordinator for the Parent Teacher Home Visit Program in the FACE Office. "Parents feel more connected to the school knowing that someone is going out of their way to know them as a person and find out how they can support their parenting."

A core element of the program is that it is voluntary for teachers and families, which is a deliberate design to build personal investment in visit outcomes and prevent apprehension in families. "We want to make clear that teachers aren't going into houses for a 'gotcha' moment where they're going to call social services," said Landon Mascareñaz, Executive Director for Strategy Development and Family Empowerment at DPS, noting that this perception can be avoided by requiring teachers to call families and establish expectations prior to meeting. By having teachers self-select into the program, FACE Office personnel aim to encourage personal investment in the visits, rather than having teachers view the visits as a mandatory program.

In spite of the reference to home visits in the title of the program, FACE Office officials stressed that the visits need not take place in a family home. Outreach materials make it clear to families that teachers can meet in whatever location is most comfortable and convenient for the families. Visits have occurred in parks, at sporting events, and at libraries. "The term 'home visit' is kind of a misnomer," said Geffen. "The key is having the meeting outside of school, where teachers can step out into the community and families can engage with teachers in a comfortable environment." FACE Office staff also noted that allowing for meetings outside of homes makes the program accessible to homeless or housing-insecure families in the Denver area.

As more Denver schools adopt the home visit model, teachers have noted positive effects on student behavior following teacher contact with parents. DPS personnel have attributed this outcome to students being made aware that their parents are in contact with teachers and to a change in teacher interactions after teachers are informed of the family's goals and the student's goals. "The next day, students know that there's a conversation happening between their family and the school," said Geffen. "There is reflection on the student's part that, as we have observed, leads to fewer behavior incidents. Teachers aren't simply telling students what they need to be doing in a general sense; they know what the student's goals are and can tell the student what they need to do to reach those goals." By improving communication and establishing ongoing relationships with families, Denver's home visit program has emerged as a valuable part of the district's efforts to prevent behavioral issues.

41. Parent Teacher Home Visits, "PTHV Model."

Summary of Promising Practices—Prevention Efforts in Denver Public Schools

- Carefully track student discipline outcomes.
 - Identify disparities or overreliance on punitive measures.
 - Closely monitor the types of offenses for which students are removed from school.
 - Ensure that teachers and administrators are providing a proportionate response to student misbehavior.
- Take steps to avoid long-term consequences associated with school removal.
 - Give teachers tools to respond to lower-level offenses other than removal.
 - Provide administrative checks on removal options through policy.
 - Consider creating a graduated system of discipline that teachers, administrators, and officers can refer to when determining consequences for student offenses.
- Train teachers on discipline policy implementation.
 - Include both classroom management techniques and de-escalation tactics in training.
 - Use training to reinforce policy guiding teachers to use administrative sanctions or calling in law enforcement officers only as a last resort.
 - Use implicit bias training to address racial disparities in discipline referrals, emphasizing that training on implicit bias is not accusatory in nature.
 - Advise officers on classroom management techniques and de-escalation training so that officers can better prepare for classroom incidents.
- Employ restorative practices in classroom management.
 - Encourage a restorative approach to conflict resolution.
 - Consider piloting a comprehensive restorative approach to evaluate effectiveness before implementing changes on a district-wide basis.
- Provide mental health support resources in all schools.
 - Consider supplementing basic services with additional providers to reach students with more complex needs.
 - Make officers aware of such services so that they can refer students in need.
 - Where possible, house resources in schools to reduce barriers to health access, and establish partnerships with outside providers where gaps exist.
 - Continuously analyze data to identify the need for specialized services, and use data to advocate for additional resources when they are needed.
- Consider engaging with families outside of school through home visits or other forms of community outreach as a way to positively influence student behavior.

“Bridging the Gap” Forums—Fostering Dialogue between Young People and Police Officers

In 2013, staff members at Denver’s Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM), a city agency that provides oversight to the Denver Police Department (DPD), began to see a worrying pattern. Concerned youth, parents, and community members reported to the OIM that low-level contacts between Denver police officers and young people seemed to unnecessarily escalate into criminal charges and arrests. As such accounts became more frequent, the OIM saw a common theme: a lack of communication—or of effective communication—between youth and police officers (whether regular officers or school resource officers, also called SROs).

“We were getting the same story over and over again that ended with kids in handcuffs in the back of the patrol car,” said Nick Mitchell, Independent Monitor for the city of Denver. “Kids were making ill-advised decisions and posturing, but by the same token, officers were having a hard time distinguishing between kids being kids, and kids who were actually displaying behavior indicative of criminality.”

To address this lack of communication, the OIM developed *Bridging the Gap: Kids and Cops*, a series of meetings that would incorporate training for youth and officers while also creating neutral forums in which youth and police could converse freely in a facilitated environment. The OIM secured a Justice Assistance Grant from the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice in 2014, partnered with other youth support agencies, such as The Bridge Project and the Promoting Academics and Character Education (PACE) program,⁴² and designed a curriculum. “We were very impressed with the relationship between the OIM and the DPD, and we really liked the idea of improving communication between youth and police,” said Anna Lopez, Program Grant Manager at the Colorado Department of Public Safety Division of Criminal Justice, adding that efforts to improve police/youth relationships remain a priority.

Structure of the forums

Denver’s Office of the Independent Monitor has consulted with several jurisdictions on the use of the curriculum described in this section. While staff members at the OIM are happy to share this curriculum, they request that it be used in its entirety for maximum results. For more information, please contact staff at the OIM: <https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/office-of-the-independent-monitor/contact-us.html>.

Bridging the Gap forums are five-hour events with carefully planned sessions that are designed to improve communication and prevent negative interactions between police officers and youth. The OIM staff members recruit participants and coordinate event participation with the assistance of professional educators and community groups. The forum begins with an introductory session for all participants, in which facilitators review the agenda and set expectations for the day. Next, police officers and young people break into separate groups to attend training sessions tailored to their specific needs, detailed in the following sections.

Officer training. Prior to attending a Bridging the Gap forum, police officers are required to attend a training session titled “Effective Police Interactions with Youth”—an evidence-based program based on the work of researchers at the University of Connecticut and currently used by trainers in the DPD. During the *Bridging the Gap* forum, police officers receive supplementary training to improve their ability to effectively communicate with youth. Depending on the existing

42. A list of organizations involved in this initiative can be found in appendix A beginning on page 73. A full list of partners to the Bridging the Gap program can be found in Mitchell, 2016 *Semiannual Report*.

level of knowledge of officers at a forum and the availability of training staff, trainers carefully select topics for the officer training session from an established list of subjects including trauma-informed practice, positive youth development, implicit bias, emotional intelligence, mental health first aid for youth, and restorative justice. Each training session is designed to give officers an opportunity to closely examine different aspects of youth behavior during police encounters. For example, officers in emotional intelligence training sessions examine how and why youth may interpret police behavior as hostile. In addition, officers are encouraged to challenge their own assumptions through training that highlights how implicit bias may affect their encounters with community members. While most of the participating officers are not SROs, each of the training sessions satisfies training requirements for SROs under the DPD's intergovernmental agreement (IGA) with Denver Public Schools (DPS).

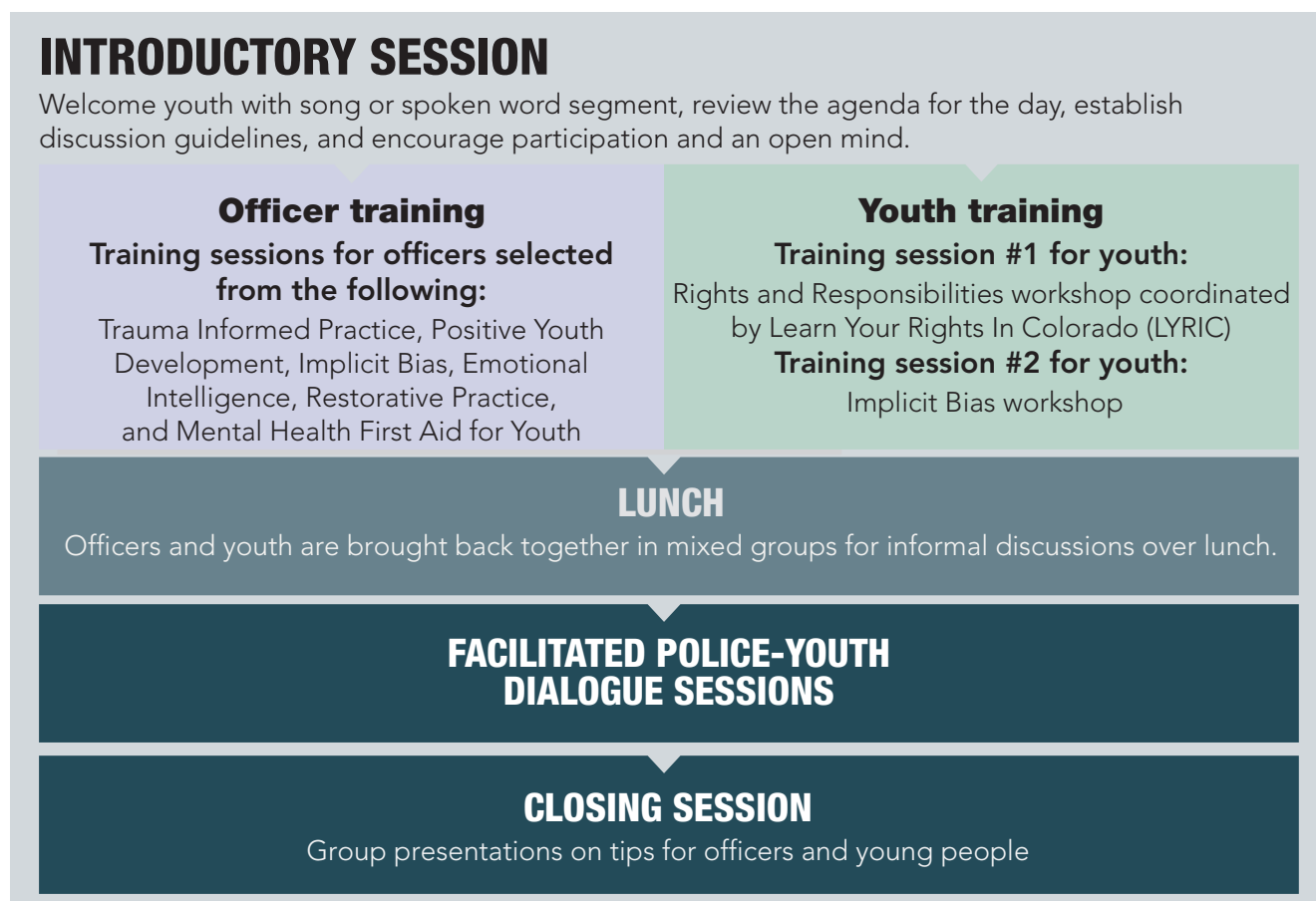
Youth training: Implicit bias.⁴³ During implicit bias training, young people are split into six groups. Within these groups, students are presented with a photograph of an unidentified person and asked to "tell the person's life story" based on the image. After students speculate on various aspects of the person's life, including employment status and history of contact with police, it is revealed to youth participants that the six images presented separately are actually three people, each dressed differently in two separate pictures. Students are then encouraged to reflect on how assumptions changed depending on the person's attire. This activity is ultimately designed for self-reflection among students and officers to confront stereotypes and biases on race and gender. Unpacking biases helps mitigate blame or shame entering youth/officer dialogues. The exercise is meant to illustrate that everyone, students and officers alike, has the potential to carry biases into everyday encounters.

Youth training: Rights and responsibilities. A second training session teaches young people about their rights and responsibilities when in contact with law enforcement. Defense attorneys at Learn Your Rights in Colorado (LYRIC) instruct youth on how to behave safely during police encounters and minimize the risk of potential involvement in the juvenile justice system. The young people learn about their constitutional rights, their legal responsibilities when in contact with police, and the process for addressing grievances with the police through the OIM or DPD Internal Affairs Bureau. The instructors also review officer safety concerns during traffic stops. The underlying message for youth is to be aware of their rights but to remain calm and use the OIM or other legal processes to address any concerns, rather than arguing with the officer or risking their safety.

Lunch and facilitated dialogue sessions. Following the training sessions, all participants are invited back together to eat lunch at pre-assigned tables composed of both officers and youth. After lunch, participants are broken into small groups of youth, one or two police officers, and at least one trained facilitator to guide the dialogue sessions. Both adult and student facilitators review discussion guidelines and establish ground rules for the small group discussion. After brief introductions, facilitators use various tools to begin active sharing within the group—for example, asking police officers to share their motivations for joining the police force. Young people are encouraged to share their experiences with law enforcement as well. Following these accounts, everyone is given the opportunity to share stories and discuss their experiences with police and understanding of public safety. At the end of the discussion, participants are asked to suggest tips for young people on how to better interact with officers on the street and tips for officers on how to better respond to youth. To conclude the forum, the participants reconvene to share their ideas.

43. For a more in-depth discussion of implicit bias, see Fridell, "This Is Not Your Grandparents' Prejudice."

Figure 1. “Bridging the Gap” forums



Promising practices

Since launching the *Bridging the Gap* forums in 2015, the feedback from both officers and youth has been overwhelmingly positive. As of May 2017, 127 officers and 676 young people have participated in the forums.⁴⁴ One hundred percent of the officers and 96 percent of the youth surveyed felt that the information presented during the program was useful.⁴⁵ Moreover, four out of five youth respondents had more trust in the DPD following the forum.⁴⁶

Grant managers at the Colorado Department of Public Safety have encouraged other police agencies in Colorado to use *Bridging the Gap* forums as a model for police/youth dialogue programs in other areas of the state. Based on the feedback and observation of prior forums, the OIM has a finalized curriculum, which is currently being evaluated by the University

44. *Bridging the Gap: Kids and Cops* combined officer and youth forum evaluations provided by Gianina Irlando, Community Relations Ombudsman, Office of the Independent Monitor, City and County of Denver, to PERF research team, June 2017.

45. *Bridging the Gap: Kids and Cops* combined officer and youth forum evaluations (see note 44).

46. *Bridging the Gap: Kids and Cops* combined officer and youth forum evaluations (see note 44).

of Colorado at Denver, Department of Public Affairs. This third-party outcome evaluation is scheduled for completion in fall of 2018. For agencies seeking to implement similar police/youth dialogue programming, such feedback may be useful. A number of common themes from this feedback are summarized in this section:

Ensure that police officers and youths feel they are on equal footing. *Bridging the Gap* forums must be organized in such a way that officers and youth are equal participants.⁴⁷ "The facilitators have to set very strong norms that everyone is equal," said Carlo Kriekels, Executive Director of the Youth Empowerment Support Services (YESS) Institute⁴⁸ and advisory committee member for the *Bridging the Gap* forums. "The cops have to listen just as much as the kids. They all have biases and judgments." The overall structure of the forums is designed to prevent power imbalances.

Allow officers and youths to interact over "breaking bread." Event organizers deliberately mix officers and youth during the lunch segment of the day to counter the tendency of both officers and youth to self-segregate. "It's intentional to have a nervous period at the beginning, have training, and then put everyone together to eat," said Kriekels. "It's a space where kids can break through and ask officers, 'Can we walk up to you on the street?'" Conversations over food may feel more relaxed than if officers and youth were put into groups at the beginning of the day. "It was good to be able to interact on a casual level and get a feel for what kids are thinking," said SRO John Avila of the DPD. "It's really getting back to the basics in terms of communication," added SRO Richard Blea. Student facilitators also noted that the conversations did not feel restrained. "Being able to interact with police officers in a nonthreatening environment allowed the conversation to happen in a way that didn't feel intimidating or forced," noted one student facilitator.

Consult youths in developing the curriculum, and involve them as facilitators so they feel empowered during the forums. To create an event that is accessible and beneficial to youth participants, event organizers recommend incorporating youth perspectives when creating the event curriculum. "No matter what issue you're trying to tackle, listening to empowered youth voices in an authentic way should be part of the process," said one student facilitator. "It allows youth to show leadership and be a role model for others, and it encourages youth to take ownership of the problem and work towards progress." Youth facilitators provide valuable insights that allow for a more informed conversation during the dialogue sessions.

Ensure that the curriculum is balanced and thoroughly vetted. From a youth perspective, including a "know your rights" segment makes the forums more balanced and encourages youth buy-in. Attorneys with LYRIC train youth on their rights *and* responsibilities during police encounters. "When we first spoke to officers about LYRIC's presentation, some officers were a little hesitant," said Hannah Seigel Proff, Director of Policy at the Colorado Juvenile Defender Center and Founder of LYRIC. "But our presentation focuses on teaching youth how to safely assert their constitutional rights while also seeing things from a police officer's perspective." According to Commander Paul Pazen of the DPD, "The program works because the structure is sound. Officers can talk to kids, and that might sink in to some degree. But when kids see the OIM and LYRIC as voices on multiple sides of the spectrum and see that officers are also getting training, that has the potential to get more buy-in. It cannot just be a one-way conversation."

47. In a youth feedback report that was used in the *Bridging the Gap* Forum development, the report's authors note, "Students spoke of hearing police speak at school assemblies, addressing topics such as cybersafety and bullying. Police also addressed them when it came to explaining expectations or reiterating rules in school. None of the students could recall a time when police had come to listen and learn from them." Schofield Clark, Brennan, and Thompson, *Using Media to Make a Difference*.

48. Further information on the YESS Institute can be found beginning on page 36 of this document.

Cultivate a group of expert trainers who are engaging and reputable in their respective fields. Agencies should secure the services of expert trainers on topics that directly impact officers and youth such as emotional intelligence, trauma informed practice, positive youth development and restorative practice. Students and officers who attended *Bridging the Gap* forums have repeatedly provided positive feedback. “There are four or five experts that we rely on constantly because they have received positive feedback from participants,” said Gianina Irlando, Community Relations Ombudsman and Youth Outreach Project Director at the OIM. “The idea is that eventually we’ll have our own resident experts in these areas that can provide training.” Police officers also expressed satisfaction with the trainers and topics covered. “Trauma-informed care goes hand in hand with de-escalating a situation, so it was very useful to have that training piece,” said SRO Avila.

Cultivate a group of professionally trained facilitators to help guide the discussion. The OIM staff worked with several community organizations in Denver to find qualified facilitators and provide facilitation training. To retain quality facilitators for future sessions, event organizers recommend paying facilitators a stipend as compensation for their services. “The stipends keep facilitators in the pool and feeling validated, and then we can use them for future trainings,” said Irlando.

Ensure that facilitators feel comfortable recognizing their own potential biases. Facilitators must be comfortable maintaining neutrality while guiding facilitated discussions. “Many of our facilitators do this work because they care deeply about police reform,” said Jennifer Fratello, Policy Director at the OIM. “That’s an important perspective, but we want to make sure that the officers don’t feel alienated and that the conversations are fair and balanced.” A key to maintaining neutrality is actively providing checks on both young people and officers during the sessions. “You learn to check everyone with ‘I’ statements so that people aren’t speaking on behalf of anyone else,” said Hannah Seigel Proff of the Colorado Juvenile Defender Center. “There are kids with a lot of unpacking to do, and some cops take up a lot of space in the rooms with their perspective. It’s the facilitator’s role to ensure that officers and kids are on equal footing during the conversation.”

Ask officers to discuss what motivated them to join the police force. Facilitated dialogue sessions might begin by giving officers an opportunity to discuss why they chose this career path. This exercise helps give youth an understanding of what motivates officers and why they act the way they do and provides an opening for youth to discuss their own thoughts and feelings on police. “I always start with an officer telling his or her story and getting at his or her experiences, so that kids can use that to weigh in with their own experiences,” said Jeanette Patterson, Project Coordinator at the Shorter Community African Methodist Episcopal Church in Denver and a trained facilitator with the *Bridging the Gap* forums. “It leads to great conversations about why people fear the police.” Officers also appreciate the opportunity to be seen as individuals by students. “It’s a common misperception that law enforcement is the beast that is out to get kids or incarcerate them,” said SRO Avila after a *Bridging the Gap* forum in February 2016. “I appreciated the opportunity to change that perception.”

Limit the overall size of dialogue groups. Facilitators recommend limiting the size of dialogue groups to seven or eight people at most to encourage participation of all group members. “We originally thought that we could have larger groups, but with more than seven or eight in a group, the dynamic changed and there was less ability for everyone to participate,” said Irlando. If the group size is too large, some participants may not feel comfortable contributing to the discussion.

Carefully consider the composition of facilitated dialogue groups. As a general rule, police/youth dialogue groups should be composed mostly of youth participants to make the youth feel more comfortable. However, organizers should make an effort to bring together young people who do not know each other well, rather than bringing together groups of friends, because kids may not be as open in discussions if they feel that they need to “perform” for peers. To avoid skewed dialogue, groups should include kids who are at risk for criminal justice involvement as well as kids without a history of behavioral issues. “You need diversity of conversation and expectations within the youth groups,” said Irlando.

Event organizers also should incorporate only one or two officers in each facilitated discussion group. If there are larger numbers of officers in a group, there is a tendency for the officers to communicate mostly with one another rather than engaging with the youth. "It's important that there are only one or two cops as part of each group," said SRO Blea. "If you get more than that, all you get from the cops is war stories. Having one or two cops is very intentional to avoid that." By limiting groups to one or two officers, each officer has more time to interact with youth participants, and the youth are more comfortable engaging with officers.

It is also helpful to include officers who have attended previous forums, as well as officers who are new to the forum. "We try to get a couple of officers who have done it before to come back, and also to bring in new officers," said Lynn Schofield Clark, Professor at the University of Denver and advisory committee member for the *Bridging the Gap* forums. "They help each other to feel okay about being there. New officers will come in and wonder if this is a set-up or if they're going to be attacked, but knowing people who have done it before mitigates that fear."

Include youth facilitators in every group when possible. When youth facilitators are present, kids may be more comfortable voicing their opinions and taking part in the conversation. "It's easy for people to fall into customary roles and power dynamics," said Nick Mitchell at the OIM. "Officers are used to being in charge, so the curriculum committee intentionally decided to shake that up. We want to have young people in a position where they are visibly facilitating in coordination with officers." With the expectation that both adults and young people can lead the dialogue sessions, youth participants may feel more comfortable engaging with officers as equals and sharing their accounts with the larger group.

Manage time effectively during the forum. *Bridging the Gap* organizers cap the event at five hours. Though it is tempting to want to include more training material, participants may not be able to focus longer than that. "We want to get in all of the material we can, without bumping into problems with attention spans," said Irlando, adding that past forums had to incorporate unplanned breaks to give kids a chance to refocus later in the day. To stick to this timeline, organizers build in buffer time between sessions to allow for productive discussions among participants.

Summary of Promising Practices—*Bridging the Gap* Forums

- Ensure that police officers and young people feel they are on an equal footing.
- Allow officers and youths to interact over "breaking bread."
- Consult youths in developing the curriculum, and involve them as facilitators so all youths feel empowered during the forums.
- Ensure that the curriculum is balanced and vetted.
- Cultivate a group of expert trainers who are engaging and reputable in their fields.
- Cultivate a group of professionally trained facilitators to help guide the discussion.
- Ensure that facilitators feel comfortable recognizing their own potential biases.
- Ask officers to actively share and be prepared to discuss what motivated them to join the police force.
- Limit the overall size of dialogue groups.
- Carefully consider the composition of facilitated dialogue groups.
- Include youth facilitators as often as possible.
- Manage time effectively during the forum.

Lessons learned

Event organizers identified several potential issues that often arise during the *Bridging the Gap* forums. Agencies seeking to implement similar police/youth dialogue initiatives should be prepared to address these common themes if they arise in discussion sessions. Curriculum authors have employed the following strategies to mitigate potential conflicts between officers and youth.

Negative perception of police officers. Youth participants will often have prior experiences with law enforcement or expectations of negative police encounters based on the experiences of family members or friends. “This is a theme that comes up in almost every session,” said Gianina Horton, Youth Project Coordinator at the OIM. “Most every kid has either had an encounter with law enforcement or has had a family member who has had an encounter that wasn’t favorable. They use that to build perceptions of police.” Encouraging young people and officers to talk about individual experiences may counter negative perceptions. “We had an officer who discussed his own officer-involved shooting,” said Irlando. “He talked about what it did to his family and the stress his kids grew up with, and the kids at the forum were eager to understand more and asked questions.”

Negative perceptions of officers may still dominate the conversation. Considering that youth come from a variety of backgrounds and come to the forums without training or filters, event organizers recommend training officers on how to talk to youth prior to the police/youth dialogue sessions and training youth and adult facilitators in how to navigate these conversations as well. In Denver, the prerequisite training for officers—Effective Police Interactions with Youth—is designed to ensure that officers will be open to potential criticism of their profession and prepared to respond appropriately. “The kids are not vetted before coming into the rooms, so the officers need to understand where they are coming from in terms of the level of disempowerment and anger,” said Irlando.

Safety issues and negative media attention directed at police. Officers may defend controversial police actions by focusing on officer safety issues and drawing attention to what they consider unfairly negative media accounts of police. In discussing officer safety concerns, facilitators should anticipate pushback from young people, who may feel that officers are defending unjust actions. To mitigate this, *Bridging the Gap* facilitators recommend that officers explain their concern for officer safety as part of a larger community safety framework. Such an approach can demonstrate that officers prioritize community well-being. When the conversation is directed within the context of community safety, many youth take the opportunity to discuss their own safety concerns, particularly in encounters with police.

If officers bring up negative media attention directed at police, facilitators should discuss how students feel when they are negatively portrayed. At one *Bridging the Gap* event, an officer brought up negative media accounts of police. A Black male student picked up a newspaper sitting in the room and directed the officer’s attention to multiple stories in the front section discussing Black and male suspects related to criminal activity. “The officer involved with the newspaper incident said he would never complain about negative media portrayal of officers again,” said Irlando.

In conclusion, police/youth dialogue models such as the *Bridging the Gap* forums can improve communication between youth and police and help prevent unnecessary escalation of minor contacts. As agencies around the country seek to improve communication and prevent unnecessary escalation between officers and youth, Denver’s *Bridging the Gap* forums can serve as a promising model. The forums can prepare officers for positive interactions with youth while also giving young people a toolkit to be calm, be safe, and have a positive experience with the police.

Promising Practices

- Police agencies should partner with community stakeholders to focus on community concerns.
- Agencies and community groups should consider pursuing outside grant funding for such initiatives when internal funding is not available.
- Agencies should recruit youth participants to events through connections formed with community groups and schools.
- Ensure that officers and youth are equal participants in curriculum development and dialogue sessions during such events. Facilitators should actively counter power imbalances and select open-minded officers to ensure that youth participants are empowered and know what to expect during police contacts. Where possible, include youth facilitators within discussion groups.
- Create a training curriculum that is balanced, thoroughly vetted, and provides context to inform facilitated discussions between youth and officers.
- Reach out to community organizations to identify expert trainers and qualified discussion facilitators who can effectively engage youth and officers. Provide professional training to facilitators specifically geared toward youth and officer facilitation skills. Consider compensating facilitators to retain qualified facilitators and reduce costs associated with training facilitators. Where possible, consider "trading" training with other qualified community organizations.
- Prepare officers to actively share their stories and perhaps why they joined the police department. Anticipate that youth will have negative past experiences with police and that officers may be defensive when confronted with accusations of police misconduct.
- Limit the overall size of discussion groups and balance youth and officer composition. Include youth of various backgrounds, ages, genders, and experiences.

Efforts from Police and Safety Officers to Prevent Harmful Student Conduct

Forming relationships with students and other members of the school community is a central responsibility of school resource officers (SRO) and campus safety officers (CSO). While enforcing laws remains a key part of any police officer's duties, officers in schools spend a large amount of their time communicating with students and establishing rapport with them. School-based officers also work with students, teachers, and school administrators to solve problems and ensure that schools provide a safe environment where students can learn.

Through a combination of careful hiring, training, and policy development, the Denver Police Department (DPD) and the Department of Safety at Denver Public Schools (DPS)⁴⁹ have made significant efforts to address community concerns regarding the “criminalization” of student behavior while ensuring public safety. Through an IGA in 2013,⁵⁰ the DPD and DPS established the roles, responsibilities, and limits of SRO involvement in schools. Similarly, the Department of Safety at DPS operates under Standards of Service developed in 2014, which seeks to limit the potential for unnecessary CSO involvement in student behavioral issues. Within that policy framework, leaders at the DPD and the DPS Department of Safety have implemented rigorous training processes and encouraged a culture of focusing on student well-being.

Implementation of the intergovernmental agreement

Working collaboratively, the DPD, DPS, and activists at a Denver community group advocating for school discipline reform called Padres & Jóvenes Unidos⁵¹ (Parents and Young People United) developed the IGA that explicitly dictates responsibilities for SROs and limits police involvement on school property. Community-based campaigns for school discipline reform⁵² were critical drivers of change that provided a unified community voice to develop policy.⁵³ As in other parts of the country, police involvement in Denver schools was leading to unnecessary arrests and criminalization of low-level student misbehavior.⁵⁴ “There was a spike in police tickets in the early 2000s that was very concerning to us,” said Ricardo Martinez, Co-Executive Director of Padres & Jóvenes Unidos. “We saw student behavior become criminalized. Shoving matches became assault, yelling became disturbing the peace, and felt-tip markers became graffiti instruments. Students were ticketed for normal student behavior.”

The 2013 IGA clarifies the roles of SROs, requiring officers to “differentiate between disciplinary issues and crime problems and respond appropriately,” to “de-escalate school-based incidents whenever possible,” and to “understand that the [school] District has adopted a Discipline Policy that emphasizes the use of restorative approaches to address behaviors, and is designed to minimize the use of law enforcement intervention.”⁵⁵

49. Though the two agencies collaborate, the Denver Public Schools Department of Safety hires campus safety officers separately from the Denver Police Department. More information on the Department of Safety can be found at Department of Safety, “Safety and Students First.”

50. City and County of Denver, *Intergovernmental Agreement*.

51. Padres & Jóvenes Unidos is a community organization in the Denver area that on issues of education, race, immigration, and healthcare. Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, “About Us.”

52. Colorado State Senate, *A Bill for an Act Concerning Disciplinary Measures*.

53. Asmar, “Denver Public Schools Pledges.”

54. Padres & Jóvenes Unidos and Advancement Project, *Lessons in Racial Justice and Movement Building*.

55. City and County of Denver, *Intergovernmental Agreement*.

The agreement also establishes due process protections for students and parents, requires periodic meetings between SROs and community stakeholders, and requires training of officers on their role and on students' rights.

"IGA is not just a transactional relationship between the police and Denver Public Schools," Martinez said. "It explicitly clarifies that SROs are not disciplinarians, but that they're there to keep the schools safe."

Elements of the 2013 Intergovernmental Agreement between the Denver Police Department and Denver Public Schools

- Police work jointly with school administrators to hire SROs by discussing hiring priorities, agreeing upon structured interview questions, and conducting joint interviews.*
- SROs must de-escalate school-based incidents when possible, differentiate between disciplinary issues and criminal activity, and use restorative approaches.†
- Students are provided due process protections: Parents must be notified when students are ticketed or arrested, student questioning should occur when it has the least impact on a student's schooling, and SROs must be notified if a student involved in a behavior issue is on an individualized education plan (IEP)‡ or is a person with a disability.
- SROs and community stakeholders, including community organizations such as Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, must meet at least once per semester.
- SROs are required to attend training provided by the Denver Police Department on how to respond to students, including training on adolescent psychology, cultural competency, and restorative justice techniques.

* After an initial evaluation with the Denver Police Department, SROs are interviewed by a panel of police and school officials. The hiring decision is ultimately up to the police department, but school administrators can define the priorities for individual schools.

† Restorative approaches to school discipline are designed to repair conflicts between students and school personnel while addressing harm caused by negative student behavior. In schools, restorative justice techniques often avoid traditional school discipline measures such as detention or suspension. More information on restorative techniques employed in Denver can be found beginning on page 46.

‡ Students in public schools who receive special education and related services are required to have individualized education plans (IEP) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IEPs provide guidance to teachers and other school personnel on the provision of special education support services to students with disabilities. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, *A Guide to the Individualized Education Program*.

SROs and school administrators praised the IGA as a useful resource to prevent police involvement in low-level school discipline matters. "It's nice to have a document to point to in instances where our role is not clear," said SRO Richard Blea. "For me, the document is very simple and easy to understand, and it's a good reminder of the responsibilities of SROs." School administrators use the IGA as a way to spark communication and reinforce expectations laid out in guidance such as the DPS Discipline Matrix.⁵⁶

To establish frequent communication between SROs and school personnel, the IGA also mandates that school administrators be given an opportunity to provide input on SRO personnel decisions by participating in the interview process. The DPD retains ultimate authority to make hiring decisions, but both police and DPS leaders appreciate the chance for school officials to provide input on SRO assignments. "In the past, you kind of got what you got from [the

56. Denver Public Schools, "Discipline Matrix."

DPD],” said Dr. Eldridge Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity at DPS. “Now, there is a much more robust amount of feedback that schools can give on SRO placement.” Through discussions of individual school priorities between police and schools officials, SRO supervisors receive more information that informs assignment decisions and goals for SROs once they begin working. “It’s all about finding the right fit,” said Commander Paul Pazen of the DPD. “Once we know what a school’s priorities are, we can use that to determine which candidate is right for the job.”

In addition, the IGA requires SROs to meet with community members every semester. Community members appreciate the opportunity to meet SROs and see positive effects from the selective hiring process. “We’ve seen both kinds of SROs in the past—the person who goes in with the right frame of mind, versus the cop on the beat who can’t handle teenage behavior,” said Martinez. “At recent community meetings with SROs, we’ve seen that there has been better selection of officers.”

The 2013 IGA between the DPD and DPS demonstrates that agreements between schools and police departments can extend beyond simply requiring police to respond to criminal activity in schools and can encourage officers to form relationships with students, staff, and community members. As a whole, the IGA provides opportunities for DPS administrators and community groups to inform police policies and provide feedback on SROs’ performance.

A culture of trust

DPD and DPS Department of Safety have worked with SROs and CSOs to establish a culture in which students feel safe reaching out to officers. Examining the actions of officers who have successfully built positive relationships with school staff and students, supervisors identified a number of key officer traits that contribute to effective policing of schools.

School resource officers—A student-first mindset

The DPD has consulted with school officials to identify community priorities in school environments and has worked to instill a “student-first” mindset in SROs. In practice, this means that officers must make a continued effort to keep students in school and out of the court system whenever possible.

Sometimes, the student-first mindset requires an SRO to focus on the needs of the student with intention and to work collaboratively with the building-based faculty and staff. The student-first mindset also means that SROs are used in positive ways and are viewed as informal mentors to students, not just as law enforcers.

Promising practice: Where possible, give CSOs and SROs access to student behavior records, so they will be aware of ongoing issues with students.

Access to student records has allowed Denver police officers to prevent potentially dangerous incidents from escalating beyond simple classroom disruption. Through Denver’s “Infinite Campus” student database, SROs and CSOs can see records of students’ past behavioral incidents and how school staff members responded.*

“We work with student services to find out which kids are on Individualized Education Plans and have recurring behavioral problems,” said Chief Mike Eaton of the Denver Public Schools Department of Safety. “We try to coordinate with partners around the school to find out what de-escalation techniques have been successful in the past, for example, if the kid is particularly interested in the Denver Broncos or something else that they will want to talk about. It’s all about getting kids to a level where they can at least have a conversation.”

Seeing the potential benefits of giving officers information about students who have a history of outbursts or other incidents, Denver Public Schools leaders identified the types of information that can legally be shared and encourage individual school administrators to discuss student records with officers stationed in schools. “We believe that, within statute, the records should be shared,” said Dr. Eldridge Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity at Denver Public Schools. “There are a number of things that come up from my office that police should know about before they bubble up into criminal issues. As it relates to student behavior, there’s a reasonable educational need for officers to have that information.”

* Sharing of information with SROs must be consistent with state and federal law, including FERPA (Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974).

As laid out in the IGA and in Denver's School Discipline Matrix guidance for teachers and administrators, most behavioral infractions in DPS do not require a law enforcement response.⁵⁷ As a result, SROs are not required to make an arrest or use force even if such actions are requested from school personnel, and officers must know how to use discretion and deny inappropriate requests. At the same time, all parties can build on one another's knowledge to collaboratively determine the most effective responses to problematic student behavior. SROs must be open to cooperation and ready to learn from their colleagues.

"It's been great to have a relationship with the SRO at my school, where we can talk about how to respond to students with compassion, and we are intentional about referring behavior incidents to law enforcement when it is mandatory in accordance with Denver Public Schools policy," said Diane Ulmer, Dean of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports and social worker at North High School in Denver. "It's an ongoing conversation, where we are both working toward the best outcome for the student and the overall safety of the school community. It's nice to have an additional resource and mentor who the kids can turn to."

To serve as effective mentors, SROs must have a working understanding of the challenging conditions in which many students in Denver grow up, and they must be dedicated to promoting positive youth development. This expectation is made clear during the hiring process, in which SROs are selected based largely on their demonstrated commitment to serving students. "You want to make sure you're not hiring someone who wants the position because they want the summer off and get to work during the day," said Captain William Nagle at the DPD. Officers who take an interest in kids and go the extra step to engage with them as mentors have the potential to serve as alternative role models for young people who may encounter potentially negative influences in their daily lives.

SROs are encouraged to get involved in community activities in and around the schools they work in. Supervisors at the DPD and the DPS Department of Safety noted that they look for SRO candidates who are willing to become involved in these kinds of activities. "A lot of SROs and CSOs are coaches after hours," said Mike Eaton, Chief of the DPS Department of Safety. "It's a great way to engage with kids on a different level and be a role model."

In Denver, resource restrictions limit the overall number of SROs. Schools with SROs are selected by DPS and the police district commander based upon need at that school. Therefore, not every school will have its own dedicated SRO, and calls for service at a school without an SRO may be assigned to patrol officers. DPD officials, however, recommend that SROs should not handle calls for service at multiple schools. Rather, SROs should be assigned to one school to establish deep connections within a single school community. "I've had street commanders say they want an SRO to handle all calls to schools," said Captain Nagle. "But the SROs need to be in the schools they're assigned to, because that's where they are building relationships and can have the biggest impact."

Evaluations of SROs, as opposed to general officer evaluations, are tailored to the needs of the school to which the SRO is assigned. Thus, SROs are held accountable to agreed-upon goals. "SRO performance evaluations are drilled down to goals within their school environments," said Commander Pazen. "If the school has particular challenges with truancy, gangs, or fights, it becomes part of the officer's goals to respond to those issues."

SRO performance evaluations are *not* based on arrests in responding to school problems. "It's hard to assess the work of an SRO," said Captain Nagle. "We don't want to measure in terms of arrests, because that's not what we want them to do. You have to look at relationships and the needs of the specific school community. You have to meet with principals and find out how they see the role of the SRO and any resources an SRO might need to improve his or her performance." These SRO goals must be worked out between the school principal and the district commander, so that the SRO knows what is expected and what goals he or she will be measured against.

57. Denver Public Schools, "Discipline Matrix."

Campus safety officers—A restorative approach to school safety

Like SROs, CSOs employed by the DPS Department of Safety are responsible for ensuring the safety of students and personnel in Denver schools. CSOs do not have the authority to arrest students and are not tasked with enforcing criminal laws; rather, they are tasked with providing an immediate response to any security-related issue within school property and reporting such issues to appropriate school personnel.⁵⁸

The Department of Safety aims to employ officers who strive to be supportive adults for at-risk students while preventing and intervening in dangerous incidents.⁵⁹ CSOs are more likely than SROs to be involved in minor behavioral incidents and therefore have a greater imperative to resolve incidents by directing students to necessary services rather than escalating to punitive approaches or involving police. Department of Safety supervisors emphasize that a CSO's ability to keep incidents from growing out of control is especially important, given that most schools do not employ SROs alongside CSOs. Consequently, CSOs are often the last in-school resource to ensure school safety before police are requested to respond to an incident.

Similar to the hiring of SROs by the DPD, Department of Safety supervisors look for CSO candidates who will respond well to the department's emphasis on keeping kids in school and prioritizing preventative and restorative action. For Chief Eaton, this often means looking for candidates who have previous experience working with children or in schools, as these candidates often have a better understanding of how to provide learning experiences outside the classroom and they tend to have the patience to work with students who present behavioral challenges to officers. "We need people with integrity who understand that kids make mistakes," said Eaton.

CSOs must be able to handle negative interactions with kids appropriately and not take insults personally. "Students see me in uniform and they automatically think that's negative," said CSO Lisa Garcia. "Kids will voice negative opinions about you, but you don't know what's going on in their life or what happened to them that morning. You have to talk to them and build relationships over time. Now, the same kids who were yelling at me before will come to me when they need support."

Although CSOs should take a proactive role in reaching out to students and school personnel, they must resist requests to serve in a classroom management capacity. Prior to the implementation of the IGA, CSOs were often used for lunch room duty and asked to pull students out of classrooms when there were no immediate safety concerns. Sensing that those conditions might provoke conflict between CSOs and students, the DPD worked with administrators at DPS to produce a set of standards that specify what CSOs will and will not do. CSOs will not be "assigned" to the lunch room or other large gathering areas for students as a sole supervisor, and CSOs will not be used to escort students who are not the focus of discipline or security issues.⁶⁰

"The agreement has reduced frustration on both sides and reduced requests to remove students from classrooms," said Valerie Barrientos, Commander of Campus Safety Officers with the Department of Safety. "With our standards of service, we've made it clear that we're not to be used for classroom management or as hall monitors. We want to make sure our officers are not responding to silly incidents."

58. Department of Safety, *Standards of Service and Expectations*.

59. Department of Safety, *Standards of Service and Expectations*.

60. Department of Safety, *Standards of Service and Expectations*.

Training and professional development

The DPD and DPS Department of Safety seek to provide officers with the knowledge and tools to respond to students in the calm and supportive manner prescribed through policy and department messaging. For SROs, this preparation supplements training requirements for all Denver police officers and focuses on communication skills, cultural understanding, and legal conditions unique to interacting with youth populations.⁶¹ For CSOs, the training is focused on de-escalation techniques, crisis intervention, and restorative practices to prepare officers for daily interactions with students.⁶²

Goals of the “Effective Police Interactions with Youth” Curriculum*

- Increase patrol officer awareness of disproportionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system.
- Increase patrol officer knowledge of youth behavior and strategies for interacting effectively with young people.
- Improve police attitudes towards young people.
- Increase the likelihood that police/youth interactions will have positive outcomes for young people, particularly for minority young people.
- Increase the likelihood of young people responding positively to police officers.

* Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, “Police Training for Better Youth Outcomes.”

Denver Police Department SRO training

To ensure that SROs are adequately prepared for their specialized role in schools, the DPD requires SROs to receive additional training beyond the standard training that all officers receive.⁶³ The Colorado Association of School Resource Officers provides yearly training to SROs on juvenile law updates and de-escalation tactics, as well as an opportunity to discuss incidents that have occurred in Colorado schools and across the country. In addition, SROs attend sessions on restorative approaches to school discipline taught by staff members from DPS. SROs also participate in a training program designed for interacting with youth populations. Entitled “Effective Police Interactions with Youth,” this program was developed by Connecticut police officers and expert trainers in response to research on disproportionate minority contact and a recommendation to improve police contact with juveniles.⁶⁴ The program incorporates group exercises, role playing, and

traditional lectures to increase patrol officer understanding of youth behavior and encourage positive interactions between youth and police.⁶⁵ Through a train-the-trainer program provided by expert instructors, the DPD has cultivated an in-house set of trainers to provide this training to SROs.

Trainers and supervisors at the DPD have credited the program with improving the department’s response to school-based incidents by improving the communication skills of SROs. SRO Richard Blea, who teaches the program to other SROs in Denver, has helped expand the program to cover all SROs and plans eventually to deliver the program to all new officers at the Denver police academy. “The Effective Police Interactions with Youth training has been enormously helpful for officers here,” said Blea. “Young people will challenge authority, and it’s not a bad thing that kids do this. The training serves to quicken the communication skill-building process, so that officers know how to respond to that appropriately.”

SROs praised the program’s focus on all aspects of an officer’s communication with young people, including guidance on body language and tone of voice, in addition to phrasing and word choice. “We felt that the officers benefitted from attending that training before they came to the *Bridging the Gap* forums,” said Gia Orlando at the OIM. “You notice a lot of little things like body language that show that they are prepared to interact with young people, even in situations that might be tense.”

61. Officer Richard Blea, school resource officer, Denver Police Department, interview with PERF research team, March 2, 2016.

62. Michael Eaton, chief, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety, interview with PERF research team, March 1, 2016.

63. Information on the DPD’s training procedures in this section is drawn from the interview with Richard Blea (see note 61).

64. Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, “Police Training for Better Youth Outcomes.”

65. Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, “Police Training for Better Youth Outcomes.”

In a school setting, this improvement in communication serves to help SROs prevent potentially volatile encounters with students from escalating into safety threats. “One of the key takeaways of the training is to be respectful,” said Commander Pazen. “It all goes back to understanding the youth decision-making process, where they are afraid to talk to police, and they escalate situations out of fear.”

The program also reviews statistics on disproportionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system and educates officers on understanding cultures they may not be familiar with. This portion of the curriculum brings to light realities that officers must take into consideration in their daily work. SRO Blea noted that he routinely encounters officers with cultural misunderstandings during training sessions. In one instance, an officer complained about people in the area he patrolled standing outside drinking beer. Blea explained to the officer that in that particular area of Denver, most people do not have air conditioning, so they come outside to drink cold beverages and socialize.

While there are frequent misunderstandings, officers appreciate the opportunity to learn about the communities they will be policing. “I could see the light bulb go on,” Officer Blea said. “Officers need to understand the communities they work in.” The training also includes role-play scenarios where “gang members” interact with officers. Later, the same actors are dressed differently, giving the officers an opportunity to reflect on how they might be inclined to treat people differently based on cultural differences in attire. The training is designed to give officers knowledge that will assist them in understanding student behavior and provide additional tools to ensure that officers can serve as a calming presence rather than exacerbating tense situations.

Denver Public Schools Department of Safety CSO training

While CSOs employed by the school district do not attend the same training regimen as the DPD’s SROs, CSOs receive extensive training to prepare them for the unique demands of protecting students and staff in a school environment.⁶⁶ Deputy Chief Robert Grossaint of the Department of Safety emphasized that CSOs are highly trained through a two-and-a-half-week academy and a 10-day field-training period followed by extensive in-service training, requiring 255 total training hours in a CSO’s first year. The academy and field training period are followed by additional sessions on crisis intervention, de-escalation, and other topics related to school safety. The overall training program, which familiarizes CSOs with tactical casualty care, emergency preparedness, and active shooter scenarios and other security threats, is critical preparation for officers who may need to respond to major incidents soon after starting on the job.

CSOs are also included in cross-training efforts provided by DPS officials on restorative practices, in which CSOs and SROs receive individualized training alongside school administrators. “We provide training sessions that are based on the needs of schools,” said Dr. Barbara Downing, District Partner with Denver Public Schools, who coordinates cross-training sessions for school personnel in charge of discipline across Denver. “We try to give school discipline teams, including the CSOs, a range of strategies that will meet the needs of their buildings.”

CSOs in Denver undergo management of aggressive behavior (MOAB) as well as crisis intervention training, which has been provided since 2014 under grant funding from the Colorado Department of Justice. Every officer completes a four-hour MOAB training session reviewing basic information, and several officers in the department have completed a more rigorous, 24-hour training that includes lectures from mental health experts and role-playing scenarios. “The idea is to get everyone what they need to survive,” said Sergeant Jason Klika, who coordinates training efforts at the Department of Safety. “Then, we can get officers into the 24-hour training to build on that knowledge.” The extended training focuses on youth brain development and incorporates a session facilitated by Colorado medical professionals discussing how mental health medication can affect young people’s behavior. The program is designed to teach officers how to recognize and respond to students with mental health issues in order to prevent escalation of potentially volatile encounters.

66. Michael Eaton, chief, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety, interview with PERF research team, March 1, 2016.

In addition to crisis intervention training, CSOs in Denver receive training on de-escalation techniques. The eight-hour program, which is facilitated in collaboration with the Douglas County (Colorado) Sheriff's Department, uses a curriculum focused on responding to people who are unknown to officers and how to ease tensions in a variety of potential dangerous contexts. The first four hours of the program focus on how to use de-escalation techniques, and the next four hours incorporate actors in role-playing exercises so officers can practice the techniques in controlled scenarios. "It's about giving officers extra options before they go hands on," said Chief Eaton, adding that the program has received positive feedback from CSOs. CSO Lisa Garcia noted that attending a scenario-based program was very helpful for her to practice de-escalation techniques and observe how they work in practice. "It was a really good experience for me," said Garcia. "It was very easy to see how the material applies to my day-to-day work."

Department of Safety leaders and other personnel at DPS stressed that dedicating time and resources to training sessions focused specifically on how to de-escalate and prevent destructive youth behavior provides critical preparation for CSOs entering Denver schools. With proper guidance, CSOs serve a critical function within the school community to support troubled students, prevent dangerous incidents, and provide an additional safety resource for teachers and administrators. "You can't treat kids like adults, and kids are going to make bad decisions," said Dr. Greer. "Officers need to be trained to respond to that reality."

Summary of Promising Practices—Prevention Efforts from Police and Public Safety Officers

- Community organizations can serve as a valuable resource to identify shortcomings or gaps in current policies. When forming policy, consider incorporating community input during policy development. Also work to incorporate community-led accountability checks into policies.
- Miscommunication or lack of communication with school staff can contribute to unnecessary officer involvement in school discipline. By establishing written policy limits to SRO involvement in schools, police agencies can guide interactions between SROs and school personnel while guarding against the potential for overly punitive responses to problematic student behavior.
- Consider incorporating school personnel input into police decisions about choosing SROs. Involving school personnel in the assignment process can help SRO candidates form a rapport with future colleagues. And school personnel can identify school priorities that SRO supervisors can take into consideration in evaluating officers.
- Consider giving officers access to student behavior records, so officers can plan effective de-escalation responses to students with documented repeat behavioral issues.
- By hiring candidates who have experience working with young people and a demonstrated willingness to mentor students outside of an enforcement capacity, SRO supervisors can increase the likelihood of positive interactions with students and provide schools with an additional resource for troubled students. Where possible, SROs should be assigned to one school, so that they can establish strong relationships with students and staff over time.
- Use evidence-based training programs that give officers cultural competency and knowledge of the causes behind problematic youth behavior, while building skills in de-escalation techniques and crisis intervention. Ideally, departments should provide scenario-based training for officers to practice techniques, and should give officers opportunities to cross-train with school personnel.

Community Efforts to Prevent Juvenile Delinquency

As in other cities around the country, there are numerous organizations in the Denver area that serve at-risk youth and seek to prevent negative behavior that disrupts young people's pathways to success. During curriculum development for the *Bridging the Gap* police/youth dialogue forums, Denver's Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM) conducted a community-wide search to identify organizations that could provide constructive input on how to improve youth communication and prevent negative youth interactions with police. Two particular organizations exemplify the commitment and expertise to improve outcomes for Denver area young people: the Youth Empowerment Support Services (YESS) Institute and the Bridge Project.

Youth Empowerment Support Services (YESS) Institute

In 2001, Carlo Kriekels and Susan Greer founded the YESS Institute to teach at-risk young people emotional intelligence concepts to give them the tools and knowledge to improve their educational and career outcomes. Emotional intelligence is generally defined as the awareness of one's own emotions and the emotions of others. At the YESS Institute, the curriculum focuses on developing social and emotional skills that are necessary to achieving success in both school and life, including "self-confidence, respect, and integrity; achievement; caring about others and leadership."⁶⁷ The YESS Institute seeks to deliver emotional intelligence education through a peer mentorship program that empowers youth leaders while providing role models to adolescents who may be under pressure from negative influences. In 2003, the YESS Institute piloted its first peer mentoring program in Denver's Morey Middle School. In 2006, YESS implemented its first high school peer mentoring program at Abraham Lincoln High School.⁶⁸ After years of experience working with adolescents, Kriekels began developing a best practices model for implementing peer mentoring programs across the country, and expanded the YESS Institute to schools beyond Denver.⁶⁹

Today, the organization serves more than 500 students in six Denver area middle and high schools. More than 90 percent of young people who work with the YESS Institute live in poverty, and 97 percent of program participants are students of color.⁷⁰ The high school program recruits academically successful 11th and 12th graders as peer mentors and trains them through the "EmoSmart Road to Success" program. This training is designed to build self-confidence, respect, empathy, and leadership skills to prepare a cohort of students for peer mentoring.

The group mentors 9th and 10th grade students who may be struggling academically or would likely benefit from positive peer influences. To inspire and engage mentees who often have troubled backgrounds, program officials make efforts to recruit peer mentors who themselves have grown up in difficult environments or have struggled academically in the past.

YESS Institute staff attempt to match up mentors and students from the same "cultural ZIP code" to provide the best chance of establishing a productive mentoring relationship. Mentors and mentees meet at least twice a week: one day to work on academics and another day to work on emotional intelligence concepts through the YESS Institute "Road to Success" curriculum that focuses on social-emotional communication skills and healthy decision-making. As mentors establish relationships with mentees over time, mentors continue to receive weekly training on mentorship skills and individual coaching from the YESS Institute to address potential problems that often arise during mentoring sessions.

67. YESS Institute, "YESS Curriculum."

68. YESS Institute, "About Us—History."

69. In recognition of his contributions to Denver youth through his work at the YESS Institute, Kriekels won the 2011 "Heavy Lifting" award from the Denver Mayor's Office for Education and Children. In 2016, Kriekels received the My Brother's Keeper Award from Denver Mayor Michael Hancock for his work with boys and young men of color. YESS Institute, "About Us—Staff;" YESS Institute, "Mayor's Office for Education and Children Honors Carlo Kriekels."

70. YESS Institute, *YESS Institute 15th Anniversary*.

Throughout the process, the YESS Institute provides weekly updates to mentee families to track progress and identify goals. Many mentees are asked to become mentors themselves following their participation in the program, and graduating mentors are eligible to receive scholarships in recognition of their contributions to the YESS Institute.

The program has been credited with improving academic outcomes and increasing student feelings of connectedness to their communities and schools in the Denver area.⁷¹ In a longitudinal study conducted at Denver's Lincoln High School examining the academic performance of chronically truant ninth-graders with GPAs below 1.0, 85 percent of students who participated in the YESS program were on track to graduate after program participation, compared to 45 percent of a control group that did not participate.⁷² Comparing educational outcomes for mentees before and after participation in the program, 95 percent of mentees improved school attendance rates, improved academic performance, and reported increased feelings of connectedness to school.⁷³ Mentors also benefit; more than 75 percent of the mentors attend college, 95 percent as first-generation students.⁷⁴ Beyond educational benefits, the YESS Institute emphasizes that a focus on emotional intelligence provides mentors and mentees with the motivation and capacity to help others in their lives. This is demonstrated by the fact that 30 percent of mentees go on to become peer mentors themselves in the YESS program.⁷⁵

The YESS Institute has been an integral component of the Denver community's efforts to serve at-risk students and give them a better chance to succeed academically, socially, and ultimately professionally. As school personnel and other youth service providers seek ways to assist students struggling with academic or behavioral issues, the YESS Institute demonstrates that peers can serve as an effective resource and may be uniquely capable of relating to the issues students experience in their everyday lives.

The Bridge Project

Created in 1991 through a collaborative effort between Denver community members and faculty at the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work, the Bridge Project provides evidence-based services designed to promote positive youth development from pre-K through college.⁷⁶ The Bridge Project operates out of four Denver Public Housing neighborhoods (currently Lincoln/La Alma Park, Columbine, Westwood, and Quigg Newton)⁷⁷ and offers a safe environment for Denver students to positively engage with each other after school hours. The Bridge Project also provides free targeted academic support to students from kindergarten through college:

- Grades K–3: Staff provides early literacy support.
- Grades 4–9: Students are offered science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)–intensive instruction.
- Grades 6–8: Students participate in YELL (Youth Engaged Leadership and Learning)
- Grades 10–12: Staff focuses on preparing for graduation.
- College: The Bridge Project provides scholarship support.

71. Kennedy, "YESS Institute's Peer Mentoring."

72. Kennedy, "YESS Institute's Peer Mentoring."

73. YESS Institute, "YESS Outcomes and Evidence."

74. YESS Institute, "YESS Outcomes and Evidence."

75. YESS Institute, *YESS Institute 15th Anniversary*.

76. Jenson, *The Bridge Project: Annual Report*.

77. While all Bridge Project locations offer space for students to complete schoolwork, socialize, and eat group dinners, some offer special resources such as a Robotics Program located at the Westwood location. Each center serves an average of between 50 and 100 students each day. Bridge Project, "Our Locations."

The Bridge Project also provides one-on-one tutoring to students K–college and has more than 300 volunteer tutors who meet with their tutees once a week for 45 minutes to an hour. Through a partnership with Denver Public Schools (DPS), Bridge Project educators track student attendance and homework assignments through the district’s “Infinite Campus” database, which is administered by DPS and provides access to selected student records. In addition, social workers at the Bridge Project assist middle school students through the YELL program, in which students design research projects and develop solutions to pressing problems in their communities. Developed by Bridge Project staff members, YELL projects encourage students to develop vital skills such as team planning, critical thinking, and public speaking.

To secure funding for an initiative like the Bridge Project, it is critical to demonstrate positive outcomes associated with the program. An evaluation of young people participating in the Bridge Project during the 2014–2015 school year indicates that Bridge Project activities may increase academic performance and improve student behavior.⁷⁸ Compared to a control group of students who live in demographically similar public housing neighborhoods, a larger percentage of students participating in the Bridge Project received proficient or advanced scores on standardized tests in reading, math, and science.⁷⁹ Grade school students participating in the Bridge Project’s literacy programs increased their “Developmental Reading Assessment” test scores by an average of 3.1 reading levels, compared to an average increase of 1.9 levels in the control group.⁸⁰ Bridge Project students also attended school for a higher percentage of days and were less likely to be suspended from school than control group students. While 14 percent of young people in the control group were suspended for behavioral problems during the 2014–2015 academic year, only 7 percent of Bridge Project students were suspended during the same period.⁸¹ Academic achievement gains also extend beyond standardized test scores; 91 percent of Bridge Project seniors graduated from high school in 2014–2015, beating the district average of 63 percent and countering historically high dropout rates for Denver students residing in public housing.⁸² Overall, Bridge Project participation is associated with greater academic performance, higher school attendance, and a lower likelihood of negative discipline outcomes in schools. These are promising indicators for preventing youth involvement with the criminal justice system and increasing the likelihood of positive educational and professional outcomes.

The Bridge Project demonstrates that organizations in disadvantaged neighborhoods can provide access to necessary services and a safe space where students can congregate after school hours to avoid negative influences. Similar programs can help promote academic achievement, prevent negative youth behavior, and serve as a vital resource for school personnel and police seeking to positively engage with students outside the classroom.

Summary of Promising Practices—Community Efforts to Prevent Juvenile Delinquency

- Consider peer mentorship models for young people who could benefit from positive peer influences or supplemental academic assistance. Train peer mentors in effective mentoring practices and match mentees to mentors with similar cultural upbringings.
- Partner with community organizations to provide free tutoring and academic support for students. Schools should consider partnering with such programs to provide access to student data, communicate how to respond to individuals’ academic needs, and provide academic accountability checks outside of the classroom.
- Where possible, house support services directly in low-income neighborhoods to provide ease of access to support services and to benefit from word-of-mouth outreach.
- Encourage police visits at community resource centers in neutral locations to build relationships with youth and communicate in a non-threatening environment.

78. Jenson, *The Bridge Project: Annual Report*.

79. Jenson, *The Bridge Project: Annual Report*.

80. Jenson, *The Bridge Project: Annual Report*.

81. Jenson, *The Bridge Project: Annual Report*.

82. Bridge Project, “Our Programs.”



Section II: Intervention

Immediate Safety Steps for SROs and CSOs

Students' actions sometimes escalate to a point of becoming a safety concern, necessitating campus safety officer (CSO) or school resource officer (SRO) involvement (or both). In Colorado, the Claire Davis School Safety Act holds schools liable for violence inflicted upon students in school facilities to increase schools' accountability for preventing dangerous situations from developing and intervening before serious injuries occur.⁸³ Successful intervention depends largely upon preparation through training, as well as establishing relationships of trust between students, officers, and school personnel, which strengthen their ability to de-escalate conflict. Although their roles are not identical, SROs from the Denver Police Department (DPD) and CSOs from the Denver Public Schools (DPS) Department of Safety report having similar intervention and mitigation strategies and priorities to address safety concerns and resolve conflicts without resorting to force or criminal penalties. In interviews with Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) staff, CSOs and SROs described the steps they take to build trust with students. This section describes promising practices and lessons learned in CSO and SRO intervention.

Students can turn to SROs and CSOs when interventions are required

Establishing trust with students before the need for intervention arises is a key tenet for SROs and CSOs. "We encourage our CSOs to establish relationships with students," said Chief Mike Eaton at the DPS Department of Safety. "Our hope is that officers will have a connection with students they can rely on if an incident occurs." Having an existing relationship with a student will likely allow an officer to de-escalate a situation more quickly than if the officer has no connection.

Officers may also have greater access to information if they develop a rapport with the student body. Students often tip off SROs and CSOs to developing conflicts, fights, and even weapons if they have a relationship with the officers. "You need to interact with each of the different student groups and have someone to talk to, so you know what's going on," said SRO Bernard Henry of Montbello High School. "Doing that allows you to have information when a crisis comes up. Students will tell me if a fight is going to happen, or if they've been assaulted."

Officers must ensure that tips from students remain anonymous if they want students to feel comfortable approaching them. If a student believes that he or she will experience negative repercussions from classmates after speaking with an officer, they may be less likely to give officers information. Officers should make efforts to speak with students on a casual level, so that speaking to an officer is not seen as a conspicuous activity. "Students will come to me just to talk, but also to tell me when something's going on or to show me conflicts happening on social media," said CSO Thomas Rooney at Strive Prep Lake Middle School. "There's an understanding that everything is confidential unless it's a mandatory reporting issue."

Students are also able to report serious concerns through a confidential reporting system called "Safe 2 Tell" offered through the Colorado Office of the Attorney General.⁸⁴ With a guarantee of anonymity protected by Colorado state law, students can submit tips to Safe 2 Tell by telephone, text message, the Safe 2 Tell mobile app, or the Safe 2 Tell website.⁸⁵ Safe 2 Tell dispatchers then alert police and school personnel about the tip, prompting an investigation and possible intervention strategies by law enforcement officials. Safe 2 Tell dispatchers also can connect the student submitting the tip to support resources if the student is making a self-referral.

83. Colorado Revised Statutes, *Claire Davis School Safety Act*.

84. Safe 2 Tell Colorado, "About Us."

85. Colorado Revised Statutes, *Safe 2 Tell Act*.

Intervention in Practice

A student approached CSO Shawn Bernard at Montbello High School and showed her a social media post from another student threatening to attack the school with explosives. Bernard quickly contacted SRO Bernard Henry, also stationed at Montbello, who coordinated with the Denver Police Department and discovered that the student in question had three outstanding warrants for her arrest. Officers were able to apprehend the student and thwart any possible threat to the school.

In another incident, Officer Bernard received information about a student with a gun who was threatening others, prompting officials to lock down the school until the student in question could be found. After the student was located, officers determined that she did not have access to a gun, allaying safety concerns. However, the officials discussed the motivation behind the threat and provided the student with mental health resources.

Officer Bernard cited student **trust and anonymity** as the primary reasons students provide her with information. "These are really scary situations, but students know that they can come to us for protection," said Officer Bernard. "They have no fear of coming to me, because they know I'm not going to put their names out there."

Students may also provide critical information to locate potential suspects. "There was a shooting just off campus near one of our schools," said Commander Paul Pazen with the Denver Police Department. "We were worried about retaliation. The SRO worked with the gang unit through the night, identifying people to ensure that warrants were filed, by drawing upon established relationships with students to get the locations of student suspects. It was a critical piece that allowed us to account for and prevent possible threats to the school."

Homicidal Threat Assessments

A threat assessment is required whenever a student poses a threat that may be considered a serious and credible danger to the school community. Dr. Barbara Downing, District Partner for Denver Public Schools, has had the responsibility of overseeing the threat assessment process for Denver Public Schools. She works collaboratively with the schools, the Denver Public Schools Department of Safety, and the Denver Police Department. There are three primary steps in each threat assessment:

1. Gather information about the potential threat posed by the student using the Denver Public Schools' threat appraisal protocol.
2. Determine a level of concern about the student based on the information gathered.
3. Develop a safety support and intervention plan for the student and the safety needs of the school community.

In most cases, students who make such threats do not have any plan to carry them out. Rather, the threat can often be a rash statement made as the result of heightened emotion or frustration.

"The goal of the threat assessment is to keep the student in school," said Dr. Downing. "Most of the time, students should not be disciplined as a result of saying something unfortunate." The threat assessment inquiry is a protocol whose design is based on the Safe Schools Initiative conducted by researchers at the U.S. Department of Education and the Secret Service following the shooting at Columbine High School. The inquiry focuses on facts that drew attention to the student, background information on the student, information about "attack-related" behavior such as weapon seeking, possible motives, and target selection.* This information is provided by school administrators, school faculty and staff, and parents or guardians.

"A typical case involves a student who has poor anger management and something triggers them in the moment to make a statement that is threatening in content. However, upon interview and investigation, there is no plan to carry out the statement and no access to the means," said Dr. Downing. "Very few students threaten more than once. The student support plan is designed to neutralize the triggers and provide interventions leading to academic and interpersonal success." Each support plan has a case manager within the school who ensures intensive follow-up with service providers and other school personnel following the initial threat appraisal meeting. If the student is in need of long-term support, the case manager can oversee the steps that need to be taken.

"We want to find out what we can about the student as a learner," said Dr. Downing. "We look at how to create an intervention plan that supports the student and ensures safety for everyone."

* Fein et al., *Threat Assessment in Schools*.

Students reported 3,467 tips to Safe 2 Tell Colorado during the 2014–15 school year, using the program in several ways.⁸⁶ The most common Safe 2 Tell tips are about potential suicides, bullying, drug and alcohol concerns, and threats of violence.⁸⁷

“Students and family members call in anonymously to let us know what’s going on,” said CSO Shawn Bernard. “It’s another way to make sure that we’re always in the know.” In one case at a Denver high school, officers received a Safe 2 Tell tip about potential gun violence. “We had a tip that there was going to be a gun in the school,” said SRO Bernard Henry. “I was able to bring in other officers to investigate, and luckily the gun turned out to be a replica.”

By offering multiple avenues to report potentially dangerous behavior, Denver officers are able to build trust with students and increase awareness of threats to the school community.

Promising practices and lessons learned in CSO and SRO interventions

Promising practice. Apply de-escalation and crisis intervention skills to resolve conflicts peacefully. When officers in schools are called to the scene of a classroom disruption, they enter with the primary goals of preventing the incident from escalating into physical violence if it has not already reached that point and helping to transition an agitated student in the midst of an outburst to a “conversational level” so the student can productively engage with service providers.

As officers approach potentially volatile situations, often knowing little information beforehand, there are a number of factors they must assess to determine how to immediately begin de-escalating conflict and mitigating potential safety risks. When a student is acting out, other students may encourage negative behavior or otherwise distract the student from engaging with the officers or service providers. Therefore, **SROs and CSOs recommend moving agitated students away from an “audience” of students who may purposefully or inadvertently contribute to negative behavior.**

“I try to move the student out of the immediate area, so I don’t have an audience,” said SRO Bernard Henry. “You have to be calm yourself to show a positive example. Sometimes, students will kick lockers and cuss, but you just have to remain calm, bring them out of the classroom, and listen whenever they are ready to talk.” To defuse the situation, officers recommend politely asking the student to leave the room rather than ordering the student to exit. “Often when a student is upset, I’ll calmly ask them to come grab a drink of water with me,” said CSO Lisa Garcia. “Then, I’ll talk to them as we walk around the hallway. We don’t have to go right back to class. Sometimes, students just need some time to talk.”

In other cases, a threat may have escalated to the point where a student cannot be convinced to leave the room. Although this situation does not necessitate removing a student by force, it may still be necessary to separate a student from others in order to prevent altercations between students. In these cases, it may be beneficial to remove other students from the room to allow the officer to address the agitated student alone. “If a child is throwing threats around and presents a danger to themselves or others, we clear the room,” said CSO Shawn Bernard. “It’s for the safety of other students, but sometimes the child will respond better without an audience and the situation can be resolved.”

Officers also may encounter immediate safety threats with no time to either remove the student or the other students from the classroom. In these cases, officers try to bring the student to a conversational level to quickly diffuse a conflict. “I recently had a student destroying a classroom and attempting to assault another student,” said CSO Thomas Rooney. “I went in and started talking to the kid about the shoes he was wearing and distracted him. Sometimes, just distracting them and getting them to talk can resolve immediate safety risks.”

86. Safe 2 Tell Colorado, *Data 2 Report 2014–2015*.

87. Safe 2 Tell Colorado, *Data 2 Report 2014–2015*.

Promising practice. Let young people feel that their voice has been heard. Student misbehavior often stems from a negative self-image or from a belief that nobody is interested in their personal development. “Walking and talking” is an effective strategy to prompt students to open up and discuss what’s bothering them. “We talk to students and try to understand why they’re doing what they’re doing,” said CSO Shawn Bernard. “We try to make sure they know that people are listening and people care. Ninety percent of the time, students are acting up because they think nobody cares or nobody wants to listen to their side of the story. That’s why a lot of situations can be resolved by just walking and talking.”

Once a student can safely engage in conversation with the officer, it is important to listen closely to the student’s concerns and respond appropriately. **Simply referring to the student by name and allowing the student to tell their side of the story can diffuse the anger that resulted in a classroom outburst.** “Once you’ve moved locations to have a discussion out of the public eye, the first thing you do is let them vent,” said SRO Richard Blea. “Then, you start to ask them questions and find out exactly what is going on.” Allowing the student to speak is particularly important for incidents that may not be serious enough to warrant an SRO response. “Every classroom has a non-emergency button to call in a CSO if a student is refusing to leave the room,” said CSO Garcia. “Most of the time, we can talk a student down and get them out of there. Often, students just need to be shown that they are somebody and that they can be happy. It’s when they’re feeling negatively about themselves that they do bad things.”

Listening sincerely to a student’s concerns requires a high level of investment in the student body, beyond merely responding to safety threats. In order to effectively engage with students and build relationships through which they can be introduced to support services, officers must be able to empathize with the students. “Going ‘hands on’ is Plan Z,” said CSO Rooney. “You always want to de-escalate verbally.”

“I can’t emphasize enough the importance of allowing kids to tell their stories. Being a CSO is really about having an ear to listen. These kids go through a lot.”

—Chief Mike Eaton, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety

Promising practice. Avoid using force whenever possible, but be prepared to go “hands on” when responding to conflict. As a general principle, officers and supervisors with the DPD and the DPS Department of Safety avoid use of force in school environments. The Department of Safety Standards of Service specifically instructs CSOs to “NOT touch students for any reason unless necessary to prevent injury to themselves, the student, or staff.”⁸⁸ This policy also stipulates that force “is used only as a last resort when all other means have failed” and is governed with strict accountability and follow-up.⁸⁹ CSOs are required to immediately notify Department of Safety supervisors and school administrators whenever force is applied to a student. “Use of force is pretty rare in our business,” said Chief Mike Eaton of the DPS Department of Safety. “If an officer puts the handcuffs on, they need to justify why things were brought to that level.”

For the safety of both officers and students, CSOs are trained in arrest control techniques and basic medical skills. SROs also receive the same extensive use-of-force training that is mandated for all Denver officers. “We always keep officer safety in mind during escalated situations,” said SRO Blea, who coordinates training for Denver SROs. “We don’t want officers to place themselves in dangerous situations without preparation.”

88. Department of Safety, *Standards of Service and Expectations*.

89. Department of Safety, *Standards of Service and Expectations*.

While proper use-of-force training is a necessary component of a comprehensive intervention response strategy, the DPD focuses primarily on providing tools to resolve confrontations peacefully. **By applying verbal and nonverbal communication skills through de-escalation and crisis intervention training, officers are often able to prevent the need for physical intervention during classroom encounters.**

“Our presence is a major deterrent, and I find that always being seen and available can de-escalate situations,” said CSO Shawn Bernard. “If things start to escalate, our intervention is always centered on talking to students first, before the situation becomes a criminal matter.”

Because the Department of Safety’s policy is designed to avoid unnecessary physical contact with students that might escalate, it advises CSOs to avoid chasing students on or off school property. The policy is especially relevant for older students who run from school property. “If a middle or high school kids tries to leave, they’ll get in trouble for cutting school, but it’s less of a safety concern,” said Chief Eaton. “If an elementary kid tries to leave, you have to go hands on, because we can’t be responsible for elementary school kids leaving school grounds by themselves.” When older students run off campus, officers must try to identify the student rather than physically chase and catch the student, unless the student presents an imminent threat to himself or others. “We will not chase students,” said CSO Shawn Bernard. “We usually try to get the parents involved once we can identify who they are.”

In a school environment, uses of force are generally unwarranted. Physical force may be especially disruptive to student learning and cause distrust of the police among students and staff members. Still, CSOs and SROs are prepared to respond appropriately to situations that escalate. In the vast majority of cases, however, training, policy, and experience provide officers with the tools to communicate and de-escalate a situation without the need for force.

Promising practice. Use school service providers to help de-escalate situations. Occasionally, other school personnel such as school social workers, psychologists, and administrative staff may be better suited than police or campus safety officers to respond to an individual student’s needs. For example, a staff member who has a relationship with a student may be better able to de-escalate the situation than an officer. “If we have the resources available, we don’t hesitate to call in social workers to assist with a situation,” said SRO Blea.

In spite of officers’ efforts to reach out to students and establish positive relationships, many students are still uncomfortable speaking with police and prefer to interact with other school personnel. “A lot of students don’t feel comfortable talking to me because of who I am,” said CSO Garcia. “I usually end up taking them to the dean’s office or to the health clinic. It’s all about getting kids to the right resource, whether that’s me or someone else.” Students may even distinguish between SROs and CSOs. “A lot of kids won’t talk to cops, but they’ll talk to me,” said CSO Garcia. “They have different feelings about cops and often categorize them as bad, but they put me in a different category. We all have to work together to meet kids where they are at.”

Lesson learned. Criminal charges cannot be avoided in all situations, even when officers do not wish to pursue them. In some situations, officers may believe that criminal charges are unnecessary or potentially harmful, but individual students or families press charges and escalate school-based disciplinary actions into the criminal justice system. In cases where multiple students are involved in physical confrontations, parents often attempt to bring charges against the other student without realizing that they are exposing their own child to criminal penalties. “If there’s a fight, we bring both students to the dean’s office and separate them into two rooms while the dean calls police to determine what’s going on,” said CSO Garcia. “It’s completely up to the families if they want to press charges, even though the most likely outcome is that both students will be charged if a case is brought forward.”

“We work with schools to deter criminal sanctions, but if we have a parent who comes to school and wants to press criminal charges, they have every right to do that. We are limited in keeping the incident in more of a restorative justice model for resolution.”

—Sergeant Cliff Paine, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety

Officials at DPS recommend advising families about the school’s internal disciplinary decision before families determine whether to press charges. Often, families will allow schools to resolve disciplinary incidents through means outside the criminal justice system after talking with the school administrator. “We will tell families that we are not going to refer a situation to law enforcement, but they always have that right,” said Diane Ulmer, Dean of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and social worker at North High School. “That’s the family’s decision, but we try to make it an informed decision. After getting more information, they do not typically press charges, because often their child will also get a ticket.”

Minor Violence is Often a School (Not Law Enforcement) Matter

Some school districts have a policy that unless fighting involves a weapon or a physical injury above *de minimis*, the matter should be considered a school discipline issue and addressed by school personnel rather than law enforcement (or SRO). The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office for Civil Rights has additional documentation.*

* Alston, letter re: Compliance Review of the Richland County Sheriff’s Department.

Summary of Promising Practices—CSO and SRO Interventions

- Officers should specifically seek out and establish relationships with students who have troubled behavioral histories. Being aware of the priorities of students likely to be involved in officer intervention efforts can be helpful in determining effective de-escalation strategies.
- Officers should establish relationships with students from a variety of backgrounds to maintain contacts who can provide information on potential threats to the school community. Where possible, officers should guarantee anonymity of student contacts to encourage communication and ensure the safety of all students.
- Consider using anonymous reporting applications such as “Safe 2 Tell” to ensure that police and schools are aware of threats from students who are uncomfortable communicating with police.*
- Conduct rigorous homicidal threat assessments when serious threats are identified. Ensure that students are not unnecessarily removed from school while the assessment is taking place, and follow up with both the student and affected members of the school community through ongoing safety plans.
- When possible, separate an agitated student from others during classroom outbursts to facilitate de-escalation. Once the officer can interact with the student one on one, listen closely to their concerns and give them an opportunity to tell their side of the story.
- Train officers in safe application of use of force, but emphasize communication strategies and skills to avoid physical confrontation. Policy should explicitly instruct officers to avoid engaging in situations where physical contact is more likely. Supervisors should review use of force incidents to ensure that officers using unwarranted force are held accountable.
- Consider whether other school personnel are better able to respond to particular situations, and include when appropriate.

* Colorado Revised Statutes, *Safe 2 Tell Act*.

Restorative Interventions in Denver Public Schools— Finding Ways to Resolve Conflict and Keep Kids in School

School administrators in Denver employ intensive restorative interventions when a student has caused harm. Explicit recognition of that harm can benefit both the student and affected members of the school community. Denver area schools that implement interventions such as “restorative circles” and “restorative conferences” have reported significant reductions in out-of-school suspensions and expulsion, and many teachers attribute these results to positive changes in student behavior.⁹⁰ Successful implementation of restorative interventions requires an empathetic approach in which the concerns of the students and the school community are prioritized over identifying an infraction and applying a prescribed punishment. Educators in Denver noted that when they conduct restorative interventions, students more easily identified problematic aspects of their own behavior, worked with school personnel to address harm, and pledged to avoid negative behavior in the future. In interviews with Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) staff, Denver Public Schools (DPS) officials identified the fundamental elements of restorative interventions.

“Restorative practices are not about ‘What rule did you break?’ The questions are, What was the harm done? Who was harmed? What was the effect of the harm, and how are we going to fix it?”

—Tim Turley, District Coordinator of Restorative Approaches, Denver Public Schools

Promising practice. Employ full-time restorative justice coordinators in schools. Traditionally, teachers and school administrators have relied on punitive sanctions such as detention, suspension, and expulsion to handle students who break school rules.⁹¹ As school districts explore other approaches to discipline, some personnel may feel unsupported when implementing a substantial change such as the adoption of restorative practices if they feel that the new measures will not deter negative student behavior.⁹²

DPS addressed this concern by hiring 43 full-time restorative justice coordinators, with the potential for eight additional coordinators,⁹³ under a grant from the Colorado Department of Education. After initially hiring most coordinators through grant funding, Denver schools now fund coordinator positions through more sustainable school-based budgeting.

Restorative justice coordinators are assigned to individual schools to assist teachers and administrators in planning and conducting interventions, as well as to provide guidance on how to integrate restorative practices into existing classroom management and discipline practices. “Having a full-time coordinator has been extremely helpful,” said Derek Hawkins, Dean at Martin Luther King High School in Denver. “The coordinator talks with students who have been referred to administrators. They discuss their behavior, what they could do differently to learn from mistakes, and how to avoid negative behavior in the future.” Employing full-time restorative justice coordinators allows teachers and administrators to devote more time to academic instruction, rather than conflict resolution. “I would like to see full-time coordinators in every building,” said Tim Turley, District Coordinator for Restorative Practices at DPS. “The schools that have full-time coordinators are relieving administrators from dealing with disciplinary problems, so they can focus on supporting and supervising teachers.”

Promising practice. Have parties explain the harm resulting from an event. The core of a restorative practice is to find an effective and mutually agreeable way to address harm caused by misbehavior. Intervention methods should include all parties involved in the negative student behavior. Rather than simply identifying a rule infraction and having students serve a

90. Fronius et al., *Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools*.

91. Allman and Slate, “School Discipline in Public Education.”

92. Shah, “Denver Teachers Push Back.”

93. Tim Turley, District Coordinator for Restorative Practices at Denver Public Schools, interview with PERF research team, March 2, 2016.

predefined punishment, offending students are encouraged to reflect on their behavior by engaging with members of the school community who have been affected by such behavior. “A lot of schools use it to talk about a student’s relationship with the community and consider harm to the community,” said Dr. Eldridge Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity at DPS. “If a student is able to acknowledge that harm, they are a lot closer to realizing the problems with their behavior.”

Reflection is particularly useful during restorative mediation sessions following student fights. Students are asked to discuss problems leading up to the fight and past actions that caused the students to harm each other. “After students engage in certain conflicts, they need to assess the circumstances leading up to it using the process of restorative practices,” said Dr. Barbara Downing, District Partner for DPS. “Each student listens to the other student describe the harm that was caused and what can be done from the perspective of the harmed student to repair it.”

Similarly, identifying harm can be a particularly useful exercise for students who have been in altercations with teachers. Mediations can humanize teachers in the eyes of students who may not otherwise view teachers positively. “It’s a big help for incidents involving trauma to teachers,” said Dr. Greer. “It’s really good for teachers to be able to hear why a student did what they did and that they want to fix the relationship. In the absence of this, teachers can start to be traumatized and may begin thinking, ‘Should I continue to be a teacher?’”

Examples of Restorative Interventions Practiced in Denver

Proactive peace circles. This method is particularly effective for resolving conflict with elementary school-aged children. Teachers and administrators employ a group dialogue model to address minor classroom problems and prevent them from escalating into more serious issues. Group discussions begin with casual, age-appropriate topics before transitioning onto larger topics, such as disrespect and honesty. Everyone is invited to speak, but active participation is not required. These discussions are designed to teach students to share and speak in a respectful and orderly manner, while addressing misbehavior in a nonconfrontational manner.

Reactive peace circles. Reactive peace circles are designed to address specific problematic behaviors that teachers have observed in the classroom and address how members of the school community can respectfully interact with one another. Teachers are instructed to begin conversations with statements such as, “I’ve been noticing negative behaviors and I think it’s time we circled up to talk about it. I want to hear what you have to say about [the problematic behavior].” After facilitating a lengthy group discussion, teachers then ask students for suggestions on how to effectively move forward to a more positive classroom culture.

Teacher/Student mediations. One-on-one teacher/student mediations are designed to identify sources of conflict and potential steps that teachers and students can take to change their behavior following confrontations. Denver Public Schools encourages teachers to use mediation when conflict with a particular student is ongoing and administrative solutions are inappropriate or ineffective responses to student conduct.

Student/Student mediations. Following the same principles as teacher/student mediations, student mediations are used to address ongoing conflicts between students to prevent future confrontations. In addition to administrative punishments, Denver Public Schools uses this approach to address fights between students and identify conditions or behaviors that led to the altercations.

Attendance mediation workshops. Currently practiced in 16 schools, attendance mediation workshops are targeted to students who have been failing to attend school regularly. Students and parents are asked to work in restorative groups to identify barriers to attendance and then to write attendance plans to overcome those obstacles. This approach is used to help students avoid Truancy Court and to examine how school attendance provides long-term benefits. An analysis of early workshops conducted by the Denver Mayor’s Office of Education and Children found that 93 percent of attendance mediation workshop participants were enrolled in school at the time of the report, compared to only 34 percent of Truancy Court participants.*

* MacGillivray, *Attendance Mediation Workshops*.

Promising practice. Encourage teachers and administrators to individualize interventions. Successful restorative practices often center around the aspirations of individual students. Teachers effectively lay the groundwork for restorative practices through the use of affective statements (in which people describe how the behavior of another person has harmed them or otherwise affected them) and classroom-level restorative dialogue that identifies and builds on student strengths. To pinpoint sources of conflict and develop appropriate action plans, Denver officials attempt to personalize restorative practices in an approach that emphasizes reinforcing student strengths.

“We do a lot of work to understand the needs of students,” said Dr. Downing. “You start with questions about the student’s interests and passions. To individualize interventions, you need to look at the behavior in context of the student’s life and experiences before identifying an intervention that will change the unwanted behavior.”

In determining intervention plans, Denver school administrators use a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework to identify student needs and effectively communicate expectations about changes that will occur in students’ behavior.⁹⁴ In this model, school officials seek to explicitly highlight and reward positive behavior, rather than simply telling students what they cannot or should not do.⁹⁵ School administrators build behavior support plans to address factors influencing student decision-making.

Often, intervention plans for students focus on life skills, targeted social skills, individualized instructional and behavior accommodations, and “aggression replacement training.” The end goal of interventions and ongoing support planning is to improve student self-regulation abilities that are integral to social problem-solving and conflict prevention.⁹⁶

Plans should identify long-term goals as well as short-term changes to quickly produce positive outcomes for students and teachers. “Talking with students can provide insight on immediate steps educators can take,” said Dr. Downing. “Simply identifying those kinds of needs informs the entire intervention process.”

Promising practice. Use SROs and CSOs in interventions. SROs and CSOs can also play a crucial role in restorative interventions. Like other members of the school community, officers involved in negative behavioral incidents may be asked to explain how an event caused harm to them personally. “Officers can absolutely serve as a resource in restorative interventions,” said Diane Ulmer, MTSS Dean and social worker at North High School. “If the harm done involves a CSO or SRO and they are open to participating in an intervention, we facilitate that and get them involved.”

IMPORTANT NOTE: Restorative interventions are not appropriate solutions for all student misconduct.

Although restorative approaches can be applied in most circumstances where student behavior causes harm to others, administrative and therapeutic solutions may be better options in some cases. For example, restorative intervention may be too traumatic or inappropriate for victims of sexual offenses, fighting, or bullying where there are clear power differentials. “We can’t effectively use restorative practices in cases where there is a clear power imbalance between peers,” said Dr. Greer. “Just like any strategy, restorative practices have their purpose, but they aren’t universal. Sometimes, other responses are still necessary.”

94. Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, “Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports: OSEP Technical Assistance Center.”

95. “Positive Behavioral Supports . . . are the generic terms for a set of planned, school-wide approaches that help schools to address (a) positive school climate and safety, (b) classroom discipline and behavior management, and (c) student self-management and a continuum of interventions for students exhibiting social, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges.” National Education Association, *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*.

96. National Education Association, *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*.

Officials should also avoid restorative intervention for students who would not benefit from such intervention. For example, “school-wide” restorative interventions where individual students are singled out for misbehavior before the entire student population may not be the best approach. “School-wide interventions are tricky, because you don’t want it to be a shaming thing for kids,” said Dr. Greer. “If you’re making a student go up and speak in front of the whole school, that has the potential to cause additional harm.”

Summary of Promising Practices—Restorative Interventions

- Schools should employ a full-time restorative justice coordinator to effectively integrate restorative practices into existing discipline policy, allowing teachers and administrators to focus on academic priorities.
- Restorative interventions should include all parties who have been harmed by student behavior, including SROs and CSOs if they have been harmed.
- Intervention methods such as self-reflection, peace circles, and mediation can increase student awareness of the effects of their negative behavior on the school community.
- School administrators should develop personalized intervention plans that focus on student needs and highlight student strengths. Plans should include both immediate steps and long-term goals to improve student behavior and help students develop critical problem-solving skills.

Diversion Programs in Denver

In Denver, first-time youth offenders are offered a chance to avoid criminal sentencing and obtain access to behavioral, family, and community-based resources through court diversion programs. Diverting youth offenders out of the juvenile justice system to avoid the negative consequences⁹⁷ associated with juvenile criminal records is a core element of Denver's juvenile justice response.⁹⁸ With limited exceptions, the Denver District Attorney's Juvenile Diversion Program and the Municipal Court Youth Diversion Program seek to provide first-time offenders with appropriate consequences (e.g., restitution) that encourage young people to address the harm resulting from the offense while also providing behavioral and family resources, such as counseling.

A different type of diversion program offered at Denver's East High School provides students with an opportunity to remove school suspensions from their official school records by completing school assignments and attending counseling sessions. Each of these diversion programs is designed to assist students by addressing problematic behavior and avoiding the associated impacts of juvenile adjudication such as long-term struggles with completing education and attaining employment.⁹⁹

Denver District Attorney Youth Diversion Program

After formally engaging with the juvenile justice system in Denver Juvenile Court, first-time youth offenders are screened for eligibility to enter into the District Attorney's Juvenile Diversion Program. The program, which gives youth offenders the opportunity to avoid adjudication for first-time offenses, is designed to connect young people to appropriate services that they may not have been able to access previously. Through an extensive intake process, diversion staff at the District Attorney's Office identify each individual offender's specific needs and determine possible ways in which offenders can alleviate the harm caused by their offenses. In particular, diversion staff members partner with service providers throughout the Denver community in order to provide youth offenders with easy access to services that are required as part of diversion agreements. As measured by recidivism, the program has had substantial success. In 2014, recidivism was just 7 percent for young people who successfully completed the requirements of their individual diversion agreements, compared to 30 percent for those who entered the program but did not complete it.¹⁰⁰

Eligibility. Eligibility screening begins with an assessment of a juvenile's criminal history and any prior court involvement. With few exceptions, offenders who have been adjudicated on previous district court offenses are ineligible. In a limited number of cases, diversion officers will accept young people who have had previous offenses in municipal court if there is reason to believe that the individual is experiencing problems that could be addressed by services not offered in municipal diversion offerings. In rare circumstances, program coordinators will also accept juveniles with a previous adjudicated offense in district court.

For example, a juvenile arrested for prostitution was accepted into diversion despite a prior offense, because diversion staff members perceived a clear need for the services offered through diversion programming. For first-time offenders, acceptance into diversion depends in part upon the severity of the offense. "We will generally take all misdemeanors and some nonviolent felonies," said Diversion Officer Ann Padilla-Parras, noting that the diversion program has accepted young people involved in motor vehicle thefts, third degree assault, and defacement of property, among other types of offenses. However, the diversion program will usually not accept certain cases that involve violence or a low rate of success for past offenders who entered diversion for the same offense. Home burglaries, sex offenses, possession of a handgun, and weapons cases where young people have used the weapons are among the crimes generally not accepted into the diversion

97. Sweeten, "Who Will Graduate?"

98. Wiesner, "Juvenile Deviance and Work Career Outcomes."

99. Wiesner, "Juvenile Deviance and Work Career Outcomes."

100. Ann Padilla-Parras, Denver District Attorney's Office, interview with PERF research team, March 2, 2016.

program.

“We provide most eligible youth an opportunity to be screened into our program. Acceptance decisions are not based solely on the crime committed. Various screening tools are used that help to determine eligibility.”

—Ann Padilla-Parras, Diversion Officer, Denver District Attorney's Office

Diversion clients are required to maintain sobriety throughout the diversion program. Diversion officers therefore refer potential clients who were arrested for drug offenses to outside treatment providers. Diversion accepts young people ages 10–17, with a large percentage of those accepted being between the ages of 14 and 17. A smaller percentage of youth are between ages 10 and 13. “Approximately 30 percent of clients are between the ages of 10 and 13 while 70 percent of clients fall into the 14–17 age range,” said Benita Martin, Director of Juvenile Diversion at the Denver District Attorney's Office. “Although charged with various crimes, a majority of charges for ages 10–13 include possession of a weapon on school grounds or third-degree assault cases.”

The intake process. Diversion officers conduct intake interviews with parents present to identify problems that may stem from a participant's home life and to notify parents of diversion program requirements. Using motivational interviewing techniques, diversion officers lead young people and parents through a series of questions regarding mental health risk factors, family life, education, trauma history, peer behavior, and drug use. The intake interview may last as long as three hours to adequately complete the client's specific diversion agreement. The intake evaluation uses a risk assessment model developed by Brad Bogue,¹⁰¹ a probation case management practices specialist operating out of Boulder, Colorado.¹⁰² “Completing the intake, we will review the assessment with the youth and the parents, and discuss the results of the risk factors and protective factors screening,” said Padilla-Parras. “Following the assessment, we review the proposed diversion agreement with clients to ensure that they fully understand what is required of them while in the program. While there are several program requirements, we want clients to play an active role in their programs by developing personal goals.”

Diversion program requirements. Diversion agreements generally require six months to one year of monitoring and services, depending on how quickly the young person can complete requirements and the types of services offered. While requirements differ by individual need, all programs require school attendance to ensure the best possible chance at future success. “School attendance is a rigid requirement within our program,” said Padilla-Parras. “Someone who is starting diversion has usually established a pattern of noncompliance with the school that needs to be addressed to ensure success in other areas.” To track school attendance and coordinate programming in schools, Denver Public Schools (DPS) employs a District Court Liaison who communicates with the District Attorney's Office and school personnel regarding school attendance data and program compliance.

101. Guevara et al., *Implementing Evidence-Based Policy*.

102. Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers, “Brad Bogue.”

“The liaison between the schools and court will help to reengage kids and get them on track to be passing classes. It’s about making some kind of progress. Sometimes, the school sees our role as punishment, but we’re looking at how we can help get kids back on track.”

—Ann Padilla-Parras, Diversion Officer, Denver District Attorney’s Office

Many diversion agreements include counseling sessions with school personnel so students can more easily complete diversion requirements by accessing counseling in schools rather than having to travel to a separate location. Diversion officers also coordinate services through school social workers. “I am in close contact with diversion officers,” said Sarah Friend, District Court Liaison at DPS. “I coordinate with our special education partners, social workers, and school psychologists to make sure that kids are in compliance. When kids are not doing well, we’ll have conversations about how to salvage the situation and get them on track.” Diversion agreements may also require specialized treatment and service options, including cognitive-behavioral programming, family therapy, restorative justice mediation sessions, moral reconation therapy, and drug or alcohol treatment.

Family influence. Family issues often become apparent during intake or early meetings with clients, including unaddressed issues that contribute to negative youth behavior. “Often, family problems are not discussed within the home,” said Padilla-Parras. “If behavioral issues arise, the question we ask is, why not see a therapist who can help the family resolve conflict?” Diversion officers provide families with individual counseling sessions, as well as group-based counseling options such as “Strengthening Families.”¹⁰³ Diversion officers in Denver have observed changes in client family dynamics after participation in the program, and formal evaluations of the program¹⁰⁴ demonstrate that it may be associated with reduced risk behavior in youth.¹⁰⁵

Victim awareness. In victims’ rights cases,¹⁰⁶ office staff contacts the victim to discuss the proposed diversion offer. Should victims agree, young people are referred to diversion, and in cases where restitution is owed, regular payments are sent to victims following acceptance into the program. Most victims are supportive of offering diversion services for offenders. “Victim advocates in the office will contact victims of victims’ rights cases when a diversion offer is on the table,” said Benita Martin, Director of Juvenile Diversion with the Denver District Attorney. “A number of victims request periodic updates on client progress, and although they want offender accountability they also understand the importance of positive skill development to help prevent further involvement in the criminal justice system. Our program uses a holistic, wraparound centered approach to services and treatment for youth in the program.”

The victim is also given the opportunity to interact directly with the offender through facilitated restorative justice mediation sessions. This is optional for victims, however, and many choose not to participate. “We have mediation sessions where the victim has the opportunity to meet face to face with the offender,” said Padilla-Parras. “They can express how the crime affected them, their families, and the community. Many victims want to understand how the youth was thinking prior to committing the crime.”

When victims do not want to interact with clients through the mediation session, diversion officers send young people to a community conferencing group. This option allows offenders to participate in community circles with a surrogate victim who has experienced a criminal act similar to the offense that the client committed. This element of restorative justice is critical to young people understanding the effects of their actions, whether the offender engages directly with the victim or with a community member.

103. Strengthening Families Program, “Publications.”

104. Brody et al., “Prevention Effects Moderate the Association of 5-HTTLPR and Youth Risk Behavior Initiation.”

105. Kumpfer et al., “Strengthening Families for Middle/Late Childhood.”

106. Colorado Division of Criminal Justice, “Victim Rights Act (VRA).”

Restitution. When restitution is required, Denver diversion officers work in conjunction with a number of local business and nongovernmental organizations to provide young people with work opportunities. Throughout this process, victims receive updates on offender progress. To ensure that offenders have multiple work opportunities, the Denver District Attorney's Office has partnered with a variety of organizations, including the Boys and Girls Club of Denver, Habitat for Humanity, the Food Bank of the Rockies, and local artists who help young people create art and sell it to pay off their debts and make restitution.

"Work program projects allow youth in our program the opportunity to repair the harm caused by their crimes," said Martin. "Work projects are completed throughout the year but largely during school breaks so clients are not missing school. Often, disadvantaged youth are not able to pay restitution out of pocket. In addition, clients age 10 to 14 cannot seek gainful employment to repay the victim. "The work program has been a valuable addition to the office as it allows clients who owe larger amounts of restitution the opportunity to work to repay the victim of their crimes while in the program," said Martin.

Racial equity in diversion. In an effort to avoid racially disparate diversion offerings, the Diversion Director reviews all new juvenile cases to determine which cases meet the basic eligibility requirements for entry into the program. In addition, diversion officers examine the specifics of each crime to ensure that potentially eligible youth are accepted into the intake process. "We review the Colorado State Court System to determine if they've been previously adjudicated and the specifics of the case to determine if the crime is appropriate for diversion," said Padilla-Parras. "We want to ensure that all eligible young people have access to the programming offered through diversion, regardless of their background."

Denver Juvenile Municipal Court Diversion program

Founded in 1987, the Denver Juvenile Municipal Court was established as an early intervention courtroom specifically tasked with responding to low level municipal ordinance violations such as petty theft, drug possession, and minor assaults. The court is designed to prevent youth who commit low-level and status offenses from being charged with a district court offense that may carry stricter penalties, including detention.

"In the 80s, a kid who stole a candy bar was in the same court as a kid who stole a car," said Patrick Hedrick, Deputy Director of Denver Public Safety Youth Programs, which administers the diversion program for the court. "Judges wanted an option between doing nothing and district court. Municipal court is about getting to kids early on and holding them accountable, but not pushing them in the wrong direction. When kids are exposed to things like detention too early, some kids acclimate quickly and develop a 'been there, done that, no big deal' attitude toward it."

"After Columbine, we started seeing kids who had no business being in court," said Hedrick. "After zero tolerance policies were implemented, incidents that used to be handled in schools were referred to court. Some kids were being pushed towards expulsion, and we were holding these kids out of school for weeks while waiting for an expulsion hearing. We were taking kids who were already struggling and setting them up to fail."

In 2008, DPS implemented major changes to its discipline policy and worked collaboratively with juvenile justice agencies to help divert youth from court. From 2008 to early 2016, juvenile tickets in Denver's municipal courtroom decreased by 51 percent.¹⁰⁷ "We're seeing a reduction in total cases, but we're also seeing kids with multiple risk factors like trauma, mental health disorders, substance abuse, and homelessness," said Hedrick. "We're getting more kids who are at higher risk for reoffending and kids who, while low risk to reoffend, have significant needs that if not addressed will likely create significant barriers as they age."

107. Patrick Hedrick, deputy director, Denver Public Safety Youth Programs, interview with PERF research team, March 3, 2016.

The Juvenile Municipal Court Diversion program was integrated into municipal juvenile court in 1995, and nearly half of the youth who are referred to municipal juvenile court enroll in the program. Diversion requirements may focus more on boosting existing protective factors than reducing risk factors as a means of curbing risky behavior, so it is common to require youth to engage in pro-social interest-based activities as a condition of diversion. “We try to keep things strength-based,” said Hedrick. “We’ve had kids conduct research on colleges and fill out their financial aid applications as part of their diversion requirements. We want them to take part in activities that provide long-term benefits while keeping them out of the court system.” Unlike the district court diversion program, which carries a supervision term generally between 6 and 24 months, municipal court diversion cases generally last between three and six months. According to Hedrick, this approach is effective but can always be improved upon. “It’s not a lot of time to work with some of the families,” said Hedrick. “About 15 to 20 percent really need a bit more time and support to build protective factors to prevent further delinquency. This includes youth and families who successfully completed the program. But we’re not intended to be a long-term intervention and for most of our families, a brief intervention is all that’s necessary.”

To coordinate services for court involved youth, Hedrick advocates engaging all necessary stakeholders to deliver services in a manner that is operationally and fiscally efficient. The Denver Juvenile Service Center (DJSC) serves as the central point of intake for all arrested youth in Denver. The DJSC houses multiple agencies performing different functions within Denver’s juvenile justice and child welfare systems. The colocation of agencies provides the opportunity to share allowable information more quickly and deliver more coordinated services. DJSC also retains access to the DPS’s “Infinite Campus” database.

“The biggest benefit of having multiple agencies on staff at the same site has been quicker access to information,” said Hedrick. “It’s a lot easier to figure out exactly what’s going on with a kid and we’re getting more accurate information so we’re able to make better decisions and do it faster, which is what the families should expect.”

Youth and families may access services through the DJSC even if they have not been charged with a crime in municipal or district juvenile court. While many youth are acquainted with DJSC programs as a result of court involvement, others access services via a referral from school staff, police officers, family members, neighbors, and youth-serving professionals. DJSC partners strive to provide support to youth and families regardless of whether they reach out before or after the youth has contact with law enforcement.

School-based informal diversion: East High School suspension deferral program

The negative academic effects associated with removing students from school are well-documented,¹⁰⁸ and Denver officials increasingly avoid out-of-school suspension as a remedy for student misbehavior. However, in some situations, short-term student removal from school is the most appropriate course of action. In these cases, DPS seeks to provide academic support to students re-entering the classroom to reduce the disruption to the students’ education. Examining the difficulties facing students returning from out-of-school suspension, officials at East High School in Denver observed a troubling pattern: Students and families reported that suspensions noted on student records blocked students from being admitted to college.

Administrators at East High School therefore devised a deferred suspension process to remove suspensions from official school records for first-time drug and alcohol offenders who completed a school-approved counseling program. “We have an alternatives-to-suspension program,” said Assistant Principal Jann Peterson at East High School. “Colleges and universities are asking about suspension, and they are increasingly upping the ante on the kinds of students they will accept. This becomes especially important when they ask students to report any out-of-school suspensions.”

108. Morris and Perry, “The Punishment Gap.”

A typical student entering the suspension deferral program receives one day of out-of-school suspension, followed by one day of in-school suspension during which students reconnect with teachers and complete assignments online. Students then have the option of attending substance abuse counseling once a week for six weeks. Upon completion of the counseling, the suspension is removed from the student's official record. "Students are very motivated to take this type of option, and it is used quite often," said Assistant Principal Peterson. "It's their responsibility to set up the sessions, so there is an accountability piece to this as well."

Although East High School administrators offer the program to all first-time drug and alcohol offenders, not all students are aware of the available diversion programs. Assistant Principal Peterson has observed this disparity firsthand in requests for student records expungement hearings: "I have found that there is a disparity between who knows what you can do and who does not in terms of student records," said Peterson. "When I go to an expungement hearing and there are private attorneys there, the issue almost always goes away. I think all students should have access to that. We need fairness in this process."

Summary of Promising Practices—Diversion Programs

- Juvenile justice officials should consider diversion for virtually all first-time, nonviolent offenders and should ensure racially equitable access to diversion for young people who commit similar offenses.
- Diversion programs should carefully screen young people for a battery of potential issues that can be addressed through support services and should consider involving parents in the intake process to better identify family-related issues.
- Diversion programs should use evidence-based risk assessment models to inform diversion plans. Proposed elements of diversion plans should be explained carefully to young people and families to ensure program buy-in. Diversion officers should take young people's strengths into consideration when determining program requirements.
- Where possible, services required by a diversion program should be offered in school so they are easily accessible to students and school-based service providers can inform the diversion process with prior information about students in diversion programming. Diversion officers should continually notify young people and parents about the youth's progress through the program to affirm successful completion of diversion requirements.
- Diversion programs should consider directing family members to needed services and appealing to family values to motivate young people to comply with diversion requirements.
- Maintain close contact with victims to ensure that they accept the terms of diversion agreements and have the opportunity to interact with offenders in mediation sessions if they so choose. If possible, include restorative mediation in diversion requirements to directly address harm caused by offenses.
- Service providers should consider housing resources in a central location to ensure ease of access for youth clients and to improve information-sharing among providers. Police, school personnel, and community leaders should actively refer young people to service providers regardless of court involvement.
- Schools should consider offering first-time student offenders the option of removing suspensions from official records following a school-approved deferral program to mitigate the consequences of school removal on future educational prospects.

Community Intervention

Community involvement is a critical part of intervention to ensure that youth find positive activities to replace negative behavior. The Denver Police Department (DPD) and Denver Public Schools (DPS) have identified many organizations that provide community intervention services to Denver area young people. The Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP) is particularly noteworthy for its successes in helping gang-involved young people to adopt more positive goals and activities.

Established in 1991, GRASP is a peer-run intervention program that works with youth who are presently active in gangs or are vulnerable to becoming involved with gangs in the Denver area as well as with their families. GRASP is operated by former gang members who seek to provide mentorship and support to at-risk young people. “The primary mission of GRASP is helping young people exit the gang lifestyle,” said Francisco “Cisco” Gallardo, Program Director of GRASP. “We focus on transformational healing and youth advocacy work.”

Young gang members are often labeled and stigmatized for being part of a violent group, but there are degrees of involvement in gangs, Gallardo said. “A lot of people think of gang members as being all violent, but the criminal behavior of gang members is on a spectrum,” said Gallardo. “There are kids attached to gangs with high criminal involvement, and others with low involvement. Many police officers do not see that difference, and because of gang enhancement prosecution, they are hard on all gang members.”

GRASP provides gang intervention services, weekly support groups, gang prevention education at DPS, trauma-informed discussion groups, long-term mentorship, and reengagement services such as job training and removal of gang-related tattoos. GRASP also offers a “Rites of Passage” training program designed for young people in need of more intensive intervention. This program is designed to build life skills and character education to those struggling with identity and pressures from gang members. A separate program is aimed at young women.

“We use an evidence-based curriculum that’s based on the concept of respect,” said Gallardo. “We focus on positive aspects of respect through a cultural lens. We discuss how pain is often intergenerational, which makes healing an ongoing activity. It’s not just reaching a plateau and everything is fixed. It’s about learning to cope, and fostering resiliency.”

Participating in various pro-social activities is integral for successful intervention, because a large number of students involved with GRASP have not had the opportunity to engage positively with their communities. “We’ll take kids to movies, plays, sporting events, and other events like that,” said Gallardo. “A lot of times, kids have never experienced those things, and they don’t get to do a lot of family activities. Other times, we’ll take them to do community service to show how service to others is integral to leadership.”

Young people are referred to GRASP by parents; DPS personnel; Denver Human Services; the district court, municipal court, and immigration court; the Department of Youth Corrections; and Denver-area service agencies.

In addition, GRASP operates stations at hospitals to provide direct intervention to young people receiving emergency care for gang-related injuries.¹⁰⁹ On Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, from late night to early morning hours, GRASP staff members are available to speak with young people who arrive at Denver hospitals with gunshot wounds, stab wounds, or other injuries related to gang violence. Social workers at Denver hospitals also call GRASP to alert them of injuries that occur during the week when staff members are not already in the building.

109. Francisco Gallardo, executive director, Gang Rescue and Support Project, interview with PERF research team, May 20, 2016.

“There’s a lot of evidence that when people experience violence, that trauma turns into anxiety and aggression down the road if it is unaddressed,” said Gallardo. “The purpose of having our staff members at the hospitals is to head that off.” Staff members use hospital visits to begin the intervention process with gang-involved young people and help the young people navigate the medical system and determine next steps after leaving the medical facility. Many youth have misconceptions about how medical care is provided or wish to leave the hospital to avoid police.

“It’s definitely a teachable moment,” Gallardo said. “You’ll ask a kid, ‘You think gangs are good?’ Well, you just got stabbed. How’s that working out for you?”

When young people begin to consider alternatives to gang involvement, GRASP focuses intervention efforts on engaging them with positive cultural elements in their communities. By using a philosophy of “culture cures,” GRASP staff members have successfully supported long-term changes in how young people see themselves and function socially within their respective communities.

“We’ve learned that you need to create a framework that supports a healing culture that’s not just based on ethnic identity, but also community identity,” said Gallardo. “To accomplish that, you need to have a dialogue and not be prescriptive in defining solutions. You don’t want kids to feel like, ‘Oh, I just take this medicine and now I’m fine.’ It’s more of a journey, where you support kids in coming up with healing concepts on their own. You really have to respect who they are and take into account what they value.”

School resource officers (SRO) and service providers have praised GRASP for using the experiences of former gang members in these efforts. SROs Richard Blea and Bernard Henry, who have worked with GRASP, noted that GRASP staff members are particularly effective at reaching students with whom other service providers often have had trouble engaging.

“GRASP has an office in my school,” said Officer Blea. “A lot of the staff members are gang priors and have credibility with students. They are a great support system.” Officer Henry also commended GRASP’s prevention work in schools and expressed appreciation for the organization’s long-term support of young people who are moving away from gang involvement. “They are a great resource for kids who want to do something different,” said Henry. “The tattoo removal is huge for a lot of kids, and the staff is available to talk to people at all hours.”

Summary of Promising Practices—Community Intervention

- Juvenile justice system officials and police should refer court-involved young people to community intervention programs that teach them how to productively engage with their communities.
- Service providers should make efforts to specifically reach out to gang-involved young people to ensure that they have access to services and can consider alternative options to gangs. And police officer outreach to this population in a nonenforcement context may be especially meaningful to young people who feel stigmatized by police. Involving former gang members in these efforts can inform intervention strategies and provide credibility for young people considering gang alternatives.
- Young people in the juvenile justice system should be offered access to community discussion groups and character education based on community values. Young people should be encouraged to identify their own values to hold themselves accountable to. Engage young people in pro-social activities to provide a model for positive community involvement.
- Consider outreach to gang-involved young people in hospitals, to identify youth in crisis who may be amenable to considering alternatives to gang life.

Section III: Reengagement

Reengagement

After young people receive intervention programming that address negative behavior and harmful conduct, they often require intensive follow-up services to prepare them to reengage in school and within their communities. When students are separated from school due to suspension, expulsion, or truancy, many become academically disengaged, further increasing the risk of losing future educational and professional opportunities and increasing the likelihood of future criminal justice system involvement. To disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline following separation from school, students must receive adequate support from community resources, the public school system, and criminal justice partners. This section of the publication highlights four programs and initiatives designed to reengage students in civic and academic life following separation from school or involvement within the criminal justice system:

1. The Promoting Academics & Character Education (PACE) community program
2. The school system's Transitions Team and Alternative School Options
3. Denver Juvenile Probation's Law Enforcement Advocate (LEA) program
4. Denver Juvenile Probation's Day Reporting Center

Promoting Academics & Character Education

PACE is a targeted 15-day program designed to help middle school-aged students develop life skills for academic and social success. It was founded in 2001 in response to a perceived gap in services for students who were out of school awaiting expulsion hearings. PACE is a collaborative initiative designed by Denver Public Schools (DPS), the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver, and Denver Public Safety Youth Programs and is administered in two Boys & Girls Clubs and the Montbello Recreation Center in Denver.

The primary goal of PACE is to reduce out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for Denver-area middle school students using a curriculum taught by a staff trained in adolescent youth development.¹¹⁰ Denver Public Safety Youth Programs, the Denver Department of Health, and the Gang Reduction Initiative of Denver provide supplemental counseling and family services to those enrolled in the program. Early indicators demonstrate that students who participate in PACE have lower rates of problem behaviors that lead to suspension and expulsion after returning to the classroom.¹¹¹ After exiting the PACE program, 60 percent of PACE participants had no behavioral problems for which they were referred to school administrators during the remainder of the school year.¹¹²

As part of early intervention efforts as well as reengagement for students who have been removed from school, DPS refers middle schoolers to PACE if they exhibit a pattern of disruptive or harmful behavior in the classroom.¹¹³ Following a 45-minute intake process to identify students' specific needs, students attend the program five days a week, from 9:00 a.m. to

110. PACE Program staff members are hired by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver. Joseph Troyer, program manager, Promoting Academics & Character Education, interview with PERF research team, March 3, 2016.

111. Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver, "Promoting Academics & Character Education."

112. Troyer, interview (see note 110).

113. Joseph Troyer estimates that between 30 and 35 percent of students involved in the PACE program have previously been involved in the juvenile justice system. Troyer, interview (see note 110).

2:00 p.m., for a total of 15 days. Notably, students are not technically suspended from school while attending the program, and there is no mark on discipline records for time spent in the PACE. After completing the program, PACE and the school system transition the student back to a traditional classroom environment.

Although academic support is integrated into the PACE curriculum, PACE staff members focus primarily on behavior management skills and character building to give students the tools they need to successfully engage when they reenter the classroom. When other needs are identified, PACE participants are also referred to support services through Denver Public Safety Youth Programs, the Denver Department of Health, and the Gang Reduction Initiative of Denver.

“Academics are incorporated, but that is not the primary focus of PACE,” said Patrick Hedrick, Deputy Director of Denver Public Safety Youth Programs and a key partner in supporting PACE clients. “Kids who come to us are not at grade level. The school provides education, and our purpose is to give kids skills to manage behavior and engage academically when they return.” To respond to students who present serious behavioral issues, PACE staff members must approach students with a different mindset than that of a traditional classroom teacher. While all employees are trained in positive youth development, PACE Program Manager Joseph Troyer recommends hiring individuals with residential treatment experience, as opposed to traditional classroom instruction. “We tried hiring teachers, and it did not work so well,” said Troyer. “I’m a trained teacher, but you have to leave behind what you think you know about working with kids. We have more staff members who have degrees in psychology and social work.”

Because students are only in the program for 15 days, employees and volunteers must also have the ability to quickly form connections with the students to better identify their service needs. “Students are with us long enough to build relationships,” said Troyer. “We’ve had students reveal trauma like sexual assault or child abuse that we can then address through referrals to support services. Often, we find that academic struggles are a direct result of trauma occurring outside of school.”

To more effectively establish relationships with clients, program coordinators try to facilitate interactions between young people and PACE staff members or program volunteers who have similar life experiences to share. Older adolescents and young adults also serve as mentors. “We’ve worked with Mile High Youth Corps kids who dropped out of high school and then came back to get GEDs,” said Troyer. “They mentor some of our middle school kids. It’s a good way to get kids to open up and talk and listen.”¹¹⁴

The PACE program also seeks to introduce students to police in a nonthreatening environment. Police officers often volunteer to give students cooking lessons or play basketball with them. At first, the officers wear street clothes, but the next day, the same officers return wearing their uniform. This exercise helps to normalize interactions with police officers and allows students to talk to police in a calm atmosphere.

“Kids in our program have had run-ins with cops, because for a long time the schools would just call the Denver police when they didn’t know what to do with them,” said Troyer. “Often, the officer would not be in a good mood during those interactions, because they didn’t know what to do with the kid, either. What we want to do is show these kids that police officers are just people. When you pick up a basketball and play with a kid, that pulls the blinders off in terms of that kid’s perception.”

114. Mile High Youth Corps, “About MHYC.”

Summary of Promising Practices—The PACE Program

- Utilize locations primarily used for after-school programming (such as Boys & Girls Clubs) to house daytime activities for students separated from traditional schooling.
- Offer behavioral management and character education programs to students rather than suspension or expulsion. Engage students in programs that focus on acquiring life skills.
- Seek out staff members for behavioral management programs that have residential treatment experience or are otherwise experienced in working with challenging youth populations.
- Officers should informally interact with students who may have had negative experiences with police in the past.

The Transitions Team and Alternative School Options

The DPS system offers a variety of alternative school options for students who experience academic or behavioral struggles in traditional schools. Called “Pathways,” these schools are designed to provide individualized support for struggling students to help them better prepare for future educational and professional opportunities. The school system’s Office of Post-Secondary Readiness has a Transitions Team that coordinates student involvement in Pathways programs and matches students to schools that fit their academic and behavioral needs.

The Pathways programs are aimed at students who are not on track to graduate or who would otherwise benefit from alternative education options, including additional academic, social-emotional, and wraparound services,¹¹⁵ while also giving students an opportunity to earn academic credits at an accelerated rate.¹¹⁶ DPS offer 19 Pathways schools within four types of programs:

1. **Multiple Pathways Schools** offer a mix of structured academic options to help students graduate and are based on the individual student’s academic priorities and interests.¹¹⁷
2. **Intensive Pathways Schools** specialize in specific support areas for students with a demonstrated need for particular services.
3. **Engagement Centers** focus on credit recovery services for students who are relatively close to graduation.
4. **Alternate Education Campus Charters** offer unique programs to off-track and disengaging students.

The Transitions Team consists of six Transition Liaisons: five dedicated to assisting students at the high school level and one tasked with responding to all nonschool sources grades 6–12, including referrals from Denver Human Services, Probation/Diversion, Truancy Court, and other sources. Each high school liaison is assigned to monitor a set of traditional high schools in Denver and identify students who are off-track to graduate.

Following a referral, a Transition Liaison meets with the student and his or her family to determine if a Pathways school is appropriate and, if so, which programs are best suited for the student. “Liaisons will meet with the student and family to learn about that student’s particular situation,” said Aviva Katz, Transitions Manager in the DPS Office of Post-Secondary Readiness. “They’ll talk about what’s working, what’s not working, what the student wants to do after high school, and extracurricular interests. Based on that information, Liaisons determine which program or programs are most appropriate.”

115. National Education Association, *Wraparound Services*.

116. Aviva Katz estimates that about 20 to 25 percent of students entering pathways options have documented behavioral issues in addition to being off-track to graduate. Aviva Katz, transitions manager, DPS Office of Post-Secondary Readiness, interview with PERF research team, June 24, 2016.

117. Colorado Department of Education, “Multiple Pathways.”

Each option offers credit recovery, wraparound services, affective and behavioral support, counseling services, and diplomas. Multiple Pathways and Intensive Pathways programs also offer internship opportunities to give students exposure to future career opportunities, while certain Intensive Pathways schools offer specialty support, such as a focus on pregnancy and parenting, mental health support, and a high level of structure for students who struggle with behavioral issues.

“Our first consideration is academics, but we also consider age, behavioral needs, and geography for students that wish to enter a Pathways school,” said Katz. “If they’re older and closer to graduation, we will usually guide them to Engagement Centers. If they’re younger and farther away from graduating, we will generally direct them to Multiple Pathways options. If they have specific needs like behavioral support, we can offer them an Intensive Pathways option. For all students, our focus is providing a program that is easily accessible geographically and appropriate for the level of credits needed.”

All Pathways programs are available by application only. Families are presented with information about the available options and make the final decision about which specific Pathways program to enroll in. “We don’t want to force students into an environment they don’t want to be in,” said Katz. “We want families to see this as an opportunity for success. In order for Pathways schools to have academic rigor, there has to be buy-in from families.” Transition Liaisons provide families with additional information on Pathways schools, take families on tours of the schools, and assist in the enrollment process. Following enrollment, Liaisons meet with students on a monthly basis to check student progress and provide ongoing assistance managing the student’s transition. “We try to provide a case management approach to school transitions,” said Katz. “There are a lot of problems that can stem from a lack of engagement in school that we try to address with Pathways options.”

Although one particular Pathways school, PREP Academy, is designed as a resource for students who are expelled or at risk of being expelled from school, DPS does not deny students access to other schools. Families have the right to apply for a spot in any other school in the district and are admitted at the discretion of school principals. Having a variety of options provides expelled students access to schools that best fit their academic needs. However, many expelled students and families decide to participate in Intensive Pathways in order to receive the additional behavioral support not offered in traditional schools.

PREP Academy

PREP Academy is an Intensive Pathways school that provides smaller class sizes and a higher level of wraparound services and social-emotional supports for students. Each new cohort of students at PREP Academy enters into a six-week comprehensive “Discovery” curriculum, which focuses on social-emotional character development, communication skills, and anger management skills.

“All staff members and faculty at PREP are trained on the fundamentals of the Discovery program so they can engage with students who have been introduced to that material,” said Aviva Katz, transitions manager for the Denver Public Schools Office of Post-Secondary Readiness. “Students move on from Discovery with the language to describe challenges they are experiencing, and teachers are familiar with that language. Teachers have reported that this reduces power struggles, and students appreciate that teachers specifically call attention to things they are doing well. Families choose to go to PREP to get that experience.”

After serving the term of an expulsion, PREP students have the option of returning to the school from which they were expelled or remaining at PREP until they earn a diploma. By providing the same academic resources as traditional schools, Denver Public Schools ensures that Pathways options are accessible to all students who could benefit from additional support. Many families, therefore, choose to enter into Intensive pathways programs such as PREP Academy even when students have not been expelled from traditional schools. “PREP Academy serves both expelled and nonexpelled students,” said Katz. “Other students with an identified behavioral need who can benefit from a structured environment attend alongside expelled students. Students are not forced into particular programs, and many choose to go to schools like PREP to address particular needs that are not easily addressed at traditional schools.”

Reaching Students Who Have Dropped Out—Colorado Youth for a Change

While the school system's Transitions Team manages a variety of cases, it does not specifically focus on managing students who have dropped out of school. School officials highlighted the work of Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC), as an organization that conducts effective outreach to students who have dropped out of school.

Founded in 2005, CYC conducts dropout outreach and recovery for Denver students who have already dropped out of school as well as education intervention for ninth and tenth grade students who have failed courses. Communicating with Denver Public Schools to identify students officially coded as dropouts, CYC conducts home visits and works with students who have dropped out to identify appropriate school and GED programs that fit student needs. Outreach staff members support young people through the reenrollment process and follow up with students for a year after reenrollment to ensure that students are supported during dropout recovery. More than 2,000 students have been served by CYC, and in the 2015–2016 school year, CYC successfully enrolled 410 students who had dropped out of DPS and supported 245 young people in need of additional support to remain enrolled.* The experiences of CYC's outreach team helped inform the development of the Transitions Team, which aims to reach students prior to dropping out.

* Colorado Youth for a Change, "Results: Impact."

The Transitions Team also collaborates with truancy court and Denver Juvenile Probation to provide support for students incarcerated on a pretrial basis at Gilliam Youth Services Center, which is part of the Colorado Division of Youth Corrections. After observing a high rate of students reentering Gilliam on new charges and not returning to school upon release, the Transitions Team and Gilliam staff implemented a pilot data tracking system to monitor the academic involvement of students exiting the facility.

"My team, Colorado Youth for a Change, or a Gilliam team member conduct outreach to determine if a student went back to school," said Katz. "It's about picking up the phone to connect students to assistance. It's an effort that we're definitely interested in investing in and continuing." Early results from the program demonstrate that recidivism for students exiting Gilliam was reduced after the pilot year, which officials attribute to improved outreach following release.¹¹⁸ The Transitions Team connects students to services available through Colorado Youth for a Change and the Denver Juvenile Service Center, while probation and pretrial release officers encourage students to drop in at the Service Center for evaluation and assistance with the reenrollment process. "We identified a gap in services and have worked to help kids exiting Gilliam make the transition back to school," said Katz.

118. Katz, interview (see note 116).

Summary of Promising Practices—The Transitions Team and Alternative School Options

- Where possible, school districts should offer a variety of alternative education outcomes for students who are off-track to graduate, at risk of expulsion, or otherwise do not respond well to traditional schooling. Alternative schools should grant diplomas and provide the same academic rigor as traditional schools to ensure that attendance at an alternative school does not limit future educational or professional options for students.
- School district personnel should reach out to community organizations and juvenile justice partners to ensure that young people can be proactively referred to alternative options when appropriate. For students at risk of expulsion, specialized alternative options should be available to focus on behavioral supports and avoid having an expulsion on a student's record.
- For alternative schools engaging students with histories of behavioral issues, curricula should provide behavior management skills to students and train teachers to recognize specific student behavioral challenges.
- School districts should partner with appropriate community organizations to reach out to dropout students and reengage them with traditional or alternative schooling options. Schools should also provide specific outreach to youth exiting juvenile correctional facilities to ensure that they are reconnected to school.

Denver Juvenile Probation

“I see juvenile probation as prevention before kids get into the adult system. If you can get kids to see that they have a future, you can make them change course.”

—Shawn Cohn, Chief Probation Officer, Denver Juvenile Probation

Denver Juvenile Probation provides a range of follow-up services and accountability measures to ensure that young people address the harm caused by their offenses and to respond to young people's unmet needs that may have contributed to the offense. The two programs profiled in this section—the Law Enforcement Advocate (LEA) program and the Day Reporting Center—stand out as particularly innovative ways to engage youth offenders following criminal adjudication.

Law Enforcement Advocate program

Founded in 2003 as a partnership between the Denver Police Department (DPD) and the Denver Juvenile Probation Treatment Accountability for Safer Communities (TASC) project, the LEA program is an officer-led mentorship program for court-involved young people who are engaged with Denver Juvenile Probation.¹¹⁹ By pairing young people with trained police officer mentors known as law enforcement advocates (LEA), the program aims to reduce criminal recidivism among high-risk youth populations, improve community perceptions of the police, and increase officer job satisfaction.

119. Partners in the program include the Denver District Attorney's Office, the Denver Department of Human Services, and the Kempe Center for Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect.

TASC currently supervises 15 officers who work with 60 to 70 clients. LEA officers work under close supervision of the TASC project and are assigned two to eight clients at a time, typically working an average of five to 10 paid overtime hours per week.¹²⁰ LEA officers meet with the clients and their families at least once a week and use motivational interviewing techniques to prevent further offending, identify goals of the young people and their families, and manage recovery. The young people involved in the program are generally part of a high-risk population and have committed multiple offenses. “In Denver, a lot of kids will go through Municipal Diversion, then District Court Diversion, and then they’ll come to us,” said Jennifer Corvalan, Program Coordinator for TASC. “Most of the kids that hit our level have been through those two levels and offend again.”

The LEA program has been widely praised for its innovation.¹²¹ Preliminary data suggest a decrease in youth recidivism, an increase in police job satisfaction, and improved community relationships.¹²² Communities interested in implementing a similar juvenile justice program should consider the following recommendations:

Carefully screen and train LEA officers. LEA program supervisors highlighted the importance of recruiting officers who can interact with challenging clients in a positive manner. Corvalan advocated involving government and community partners in LEA selection to ensure that officers are fully committed to the program.

The selection process is purposefully rigorous. “LEA officers are hand-picked by TASC,” said Corvalan. “We don’t want to make this an easy job to get. We look at their police history and screen out people who we don’t think would be a good fit. After hiring, we have a coaching relationship with them.”

Participating officers enthusiastically support the program and actively recruit additional officers. “Most of the cops I know want to make a difference in the community, but a lot of cops get to a point where they think they can’t really make a difference,” said Lieutenant Steven Addison of the DPD, who supervises the LEA program. “LEAs all say that being in the program makes their regular job better and more rewarding, and they pass that along to other officers.”

“Many of our clients have had exposure to trauma and can benefit from positive adult role models and mentors.”

—Shawn Cohn, Chief Probation Officer, Denver Juvenile Probation

Match clients with appropriate advocates. TASC matches clients with appropriate advocates who are best prepared to meet specific client needs. This is particularly relevant for clients who have a history of abuse, such as human trafficking victims. “I specifically hired female officers to work with our human trafficking population and build trust,” said Corvalan. “Mentorship from LEA officers in that area is needed so that victims can get out of the hold of perpetrators.”

Encourage youth engagement in social and community events. LEA officers encourage broader community engagement by taking clients to community events. This element of the program is designed to help young people avoid negative influences and observe positive community interaction. “We’ve moved away from giving kids community service, because it’s viewed as punishment,” said Corvalan. “Now, we’ll give kids 40 hours of community engagement. It can be something like being part of a basketball team or a church youth group. It’s about engaging with the community in a positive way.”

120. Overtime is paid by the Denver Police Department. Steven Addison, lieutenant, Denver Police Department, interview with PERF research team, March 2, 2016.

121. Cooper, Rajae, and Rodriguez, “The Benefits of Law Enforcement Advocates.”

122. Cooper, Rajae, and Rodriguez, “The Benefits of Law Enforcement Advocates.”

The frequent interactions with young people in the community also serves as an effective community policing effort. “The program works with about 70 kids right now, but there are probably 500 family members we’ve been involved with as a result of this work,” said Lieutenant Addison. “You end up meeting and talking to a lot of people in client families. Knowing that you work with one of their family members can have a positive impact on perceptions of officers.”

“LEA officers are really mentors for these kids. We hold the kids accountable to some extent, but our job is really to build a solid relationship with them. We want to show that we’re not just trying to put people in jail. Within a month or two, you’ll see kids who have had bad relations with police in the past referring to their LEAs as ‘my cop.’”

—Lieutenant Steven Addison, Denver Police Department

Hold young people accountable to the juvenile justice system. Although interactions with clients and family members are usually positive, LEA officers must tell clients that they may experience additional sanctions if they commit further offenses. “There has to be accountability as a part of this,” said Lieutenant Addison. “We’re in constant communication with the family about what we see going on with kids. We let them know that we don’t want to arrest anyone, but we will if we have to.”

Frequent home visits likely serve as a deterrent and may limit the possibility of young people engaging with negative influences. “Having cops in homes keeps the negative people away,” said Lieutenant Addison. “It works really well as a refusal tool for kids. With the gang kids, it’s nice for them to be able to say, ‘Don’t come over, my LEA could show up at the house.’”

LEA officers, clients, and their families have reported many positive impacts as a result of the program:¹²³

- Among LEA officers, 64 percent reported enhanced job performance as a result of their participation, 73 percent reported increased sensitivity and skills, and 70 percent reported higher job satisfaction.¹²⁴
- Among LEA clients, 56 percent reported that officers were very good at helping them to abstain from drugs and alcohol, and 47 percent reported that officers were very good at helping with family problem-solving.
- Among LEA client family members, 69 percent of family members reported a positive impact on communication between family members and police, 63 percent reported positive changes in family attitudes towards police, and 63 percent reported that LEA involvement had a positive impact on community safety.¹²⁵

123. A comparison between young people participating in the LEA program with a control group of demographically similar young people involved with probation but not participating in LEA found the following results: Of young people participating in LEA, 47 percent had zero probation revocations in the reporting period, 43 percent had a failure to appear/comply, and 36 percent were placed in institutional commitment while enrolled. In the comparison group, 36 percent had zero probation revocations, 58 percent had a failure to appear/comply, and 64 percent were placed in institutional commitment. Denver Police Department, *Denver Police Department Law Enforcement Advocate Program*.

124. Denver Police Department, *Denver Police Department Law Enforcement Advocate Program*.

125. Denver Police Department, *Denver Police Department Law Enforcement Advocate Program*.

Juvenile Records Considerations

Having a record of juvenile court adjudication can have a significant negative impact on educational and professional opportunities for adolescents. Probation officers therefore actively assist young people with the process of having their juvenile court records expunged.

“Most kids are eligible for expungement, and we will help them expunge records,” said Shawn Cohn, Chief Probation Officer for Denver Juvenile Probation. “We work with the Juvenile Defender Coalition to complete the paperwork and allow kids to have a fresh start. We want to make sure that kids aren’t punished for the rest of their lives.” Although expungement efforts are meant to aid young people in avoiding excessive consequences due to court involvement, arrest records continue to cause problems for young people once they leave the juvenile justice system. Denver officials identified juvenile arrest records as an area ready for future policy reform. “Kids are still getting caught up in arrest records,” said Cohn. “Employers can run arrest records even if they can’t see criminal records.”

Day Reporting Center

The Day Reporting Center in Denver serves as a resource for academic and other services for young people not currently involved with either traditional or pathways schools. “We created the Day Reporting Center for kids who are not in school and not working,” said Shawn Cohn, Chief Probation Officer for Denver Juvenile Probation. “It’s a place where they can do community service as part of probation requirements and meet with discussion groups. We work with the DPS Transitions Team and make sure that kids have access to academic-credits recovery, so that when they transition back to school, they’re not so far behind. With some of these kids, they haven’t been in school for two years, and you just have to focus on getting them to interact positively in a room with ten other kids.”

The Day Reporting Center is primarily a self-directed program for older, more independent young people as well as those awaiting enrollment in a pathways program or those who have been out of school for a long period of time. “We try to have conversations with kids before they choose an option,” said Sarah Friend, District/Court Liaison for DPS. “The Day Reporting Center is a lot of self-directed computer work and is not a good solution for kids with really involved IEPs [Individualized Educational Programs].¹²⁶ The goal is to get kids in schools that cater to their academic needs.” According to Katz, “Day Reporting is especially helpful if a kid gets out of Gilliam Juvenile Services Center and is on probation, but the school that is the best fit for them is not currently enrolling. Most schools do not enroll on an ongoing basis, so in the meantime, students can attend the Day Reporting Center, engage in productive activity, and begin to recover enough school credits to graduate.”

Summary of Promising Practices: Juvenile Probation

- Consider involving police officers in mentoring court-involved young people to facilitate positive interactions between officers and young people. Train officer mentors in motivational interviewing techniques, and carefully select officers who are likely to engage well with a youth offender population.
- Use officer mentors to engage with youth offender communities and family members in a non-enforcement context. Engage young people in pro-social activities and meeting young people at their homes can reduce the impact of negative influences in the lives of youth offenders.
- For court-involved young people not currently in school, consider operating daytime academic centers until they can be reconnected to long-term schooling options.
- Assist youth with expunging their juvenile records to ensure that they are not cut off from future opportunities due to juvenile offenses.

126. Students in public schools who receive special education and related services are required to have individualized education plans (IEP) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IEPs provide guidance to teachers and other school personnel on the provision of special education support services to students with disabilities. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, *A Guide to the Individualized Education Program*.



Conclusion

Historically, school discipline practices have focused on punishments for misbehavior, including the most severe sanctions of removing students from the classroom either by suspension or expulsion and even referring youth to the juvenile or criminal justice system. Since the early 2000s, strict policies and procedures to address violence and other negative conduct by students have led to a phenomenon known as “the school-to-prison pipeline,” in which troubled students may not receive assistance in handling problems in their lives, but rather are removed from school and subjected to sanctions in the juvenile justice or criminal justice systems. Because removal from school and a justice system “record” make it even more difficult for a young person to get his or her life back on track, these sanctions against young people can be extremely counterproductive.

As violent incidents in schools have become more prevalent, some school administrators also have sought to provide a safer environment for students through the presence of school resource officers (SRO). But the job of SROs is more difficult if they are perceived as instruments of the school-to-prison pipeline rather than as resources to increase school safety and help all students to succeed.

With this understanding in mind, school officials and police departments should work together to ensure safety while also minimizing the use of sanctions that can cause serious damage to a youth’s prospects for success. In addition, schools and law enforcement officials should work with juvenile courts when students must be referred to evaluate such options as diversion or alternative treatment. Juvenile courts must also conduct data collection and analysis to identify areas of unnecessary criminalization related to school-based negative behavior. And SROs must take great care to effectively integrate their efforts within the network of school personnel and outside service providers who seek to ensure school safety and help students to solve problems.

Any attempt to comprehensively modify existing policies and thereby disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline should include the following elements:

- (1) a school discipline policy focused on responding to student issues within the school environment rather than removing students from the classroom;
- (2) school safety planning that values input from a variety of partners and provides a platform for collaboration and communication among stakeholders;
- (3) explicit support for students involved in every stage of the school discipline system and juvenile justice systems, including access to mental health services, behavioral management programs, academic tutoring, alternative education options, and juvenile and criminal diversion programs;
- (4) address interactions with students who have disabilities through policies as procedures as well as trainings of SROs and school personnel.

The Denver community’s inclusive approach to school safety incorporates each of these elements to ensure the greatest possibility of student success. Notably, the rates of behavioral incidents, student suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement in Denver Public Schools (DPS) have declined since 2012 despite a 6 percent increase in total student enrollment over the same period.¹²⁷ Specifically, from the 2012–2013 school year to the 2014–2015 school year, the number of behavioral incidents declined by 9 percent, district-wide in-school suspensions by 35 percent, out-of-school suspensions by 15 percent, expulsions by 32 percent, and referrals to law enforcement by 30 percent.¹²⁸

127. Zubrzycki, “As Denver Public Schools Enrollment Booms.”

128. Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity, DPS (see note 7).

In this report, several themes emerged as PERF examined the efforts of the Denver Police Department (DPD), DPS, the Denver District Attorney's Office, Denver Juvenile Probation, and numerous community partners. For communities seeking to replicate the success of Denver's current efforts to actively counter the school-to-prison pipeline, the following principles can serve as a guide.

Police officers stationed in schools must engage with young people in neutral, nonthreatening situations and settings to strengthen trust and build positive relationships with the students.

In interviews with police officers and service providers, PERF researchers were repeatedly advised that officers must interact with students in neutral circumstances that allow for casual discussions. In this way, officers can establish relationships with students and gain their trust.

The DPD has made efforts to facilitate these types of interactions for officers by partnering with school personnel and community organizations to establish cultural expectations for officers and provide opportunities for officers and young people to meet on equal terms. Most prominently, Denver's *Bridging the Gap* forums provide an extremely promising model for facilitated interactions between officers and young people of all backgrounds.

In addition, community organizations such as the Bridge Project and Promoting Academics & Character Education (PACE) regularly invite officers to engage with youth in community centers. This provides an opportunity for young people to see police officers as regular people and for the two groups to learn from each other. The DPD also encourages its officers to pursue informal interactions with youth through juvenile justice system partners such as the Denver Juvenile Probation Law Enforcement Advocate program. Officers have endorsed these opportunities as crucial to improving their performance in school environments and interactions with young people.

Empower students, families, and victims to work together collaboratively to determine the best path forward following student misconduct.

Denver stakeholders consistently noted the benefits of soliciting input from all persons who are affected by harmful student conduct. Rather than unilaterally disciplining students or referring them to the juvenile justice system, school and police officials can better address the harm caused by student behavior by taking community and victim perspectives into account. Policy makers and practitioners should aim to operate with full information before arriving at a resolution, especially when a resolution may cause further harm if administered inappropriately. In Denver, implementing restorative approaches in school discipline practices and in the juvenile justice system has allowed students, families, and victims to arrive at mutually beneficial resolutions to conflict, while avoiding harsh consequences for student offenders. Such measures have not led to an increase in student offending; on the contrary, several Denver schools have reported improved behavioral outcomes following changes in discipline policy and implementation of restorative practices.

Monitor school discipline and juvenile justice data to avoid policies that result in racially disparate and consequentially disproportionate outcomes.

For years, school officials and police have used suspension, expulsion, and arrest to respond to school-based offenses. In Denver, as in other cities, juvenile justice advocates were among the first to bring attention to the profoundly negative consequences that such actions have on students' educational and professional development as well as the stark racial disparities associated with the use of such measures. Research on racial disparities in enforcement, as well as disproportionately negative outcomes in relation to minor harms caused by petty misbehavior, was a major driver of policy change with respect to disciplinary systems, the roles of school resource officers, and determining access to juvenile justice diversion programs.

In addition to the policy changes implemented to address these disparities, DPS works with organizations such as Padres & Jóvenes Unidos to address racial disparities in how students are disciplined. Both the DPD and DPS are working to mitigate racially disparate outcomes by providing training on implicit bias to employees, employing restorative justice coordinators to directly address harmful student conduct through restorative and therapeutic approaches rather than punitive measures, and continuing to monitor disciplinary data to avoid inequitable outcomes.

In response to the substantial harms known to be associated with removal of students from school, service providers throughout the Denver area are proactively referring students to services that can address behavioral challenges, mental health issues, and alternative education options for students who are expelled. The Denver District Attorney's Juvenile Diversion Program, for example, reviews all case files to ensure that all offenders are considered for and referred to diversion where appropriate.

Service providers must work collaboratively to comprehensively identify and address students' unmet needs.

Even when officers and school personnel proactively refer youth to service providers, student needs may still be unaddressed if providers do not effectively communicate with each other to determine the specific challenges facing individual students. Students may be less forthcoming about issues because of social stigma, or may be reluctant or unable to approach service providers on their own because of transportation access issues. Service providers must provide convenient, accessible support that systematically identifies and addresses students' needs.

Several Denver service providers described rigorous intake processes that provide layers of accountability designed to penetrate surface-level concerns and detect underlying issues. At the Denver District Attorney's Juvenile Diversion program, diversion officers credit a rigorous intake process as an important factor in developing individualized diversion agreements, and program participants who successfully complete agreement requirements have experienced reduced recidivism.¹²⁹ In addition, providers have developed information-sharing agreements to ensure easy access to relevant data. By sharing information and reviewing past efforts, service providers may more effectively respond to individual needs and avoid duplicating efforts. Through increased access to student behavioral records, for example, SROs and campus safety officers are able to share de-escalation strategies that have been successful for individual students and prepare for future encounters. In addition, access to the Infinite Campus academic database administered by DPS has allowed staff members at the Bridge Project to devise individualized study plans for students attending after-school tutoring, which is associated with greater academic performance, higher school attendance, and a lower likelihood of negative discipline outcomes for students participating.¹³⁰ Access to school records has also been helpful for staff members at the Denver Juvenile Service Center, who use data-sharing agreements to quickly address outstanding questions about youth clients.

Denver's comprehensive, collaborative approach to ensuring school safety and positive youth development has resulted in an inclusive model in which school discipline is not synonymous with excluding students from the classroom. Instead, service providers and practitioners have worked to ensure safety by developing policies and methods to prevent the conditions leading to safety threats, address harm through restorative approaches, and effectively reengage court-involved students through community-led initiatives and academic opportunities. Following these efforts, data reported by DPS officials demonstrate a 35 percent reduction in in-school suspensions district-wide, a 32 percent reduction in expulsions, and 30 percent reduction in referrals to police without corresponding spikes in school violence.¹³¹ Over the same period, the total number of behavioral incidents reported to Denver Public Schools declined by 9 percent¹³² in spite of a 6 percent increase in the student population.¹³³

129. In 2014, recidivism was just 7 percent for young people who successfully completed the requirements of their individual diversion agreements, compared to 30 percent for those who entered the program but did not complete it. Padilla-Parras, interview (see note 100).

130. Jenson, *The Bridge Project: Annual Report*.

131. Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity, DPS (see note 7).

132. Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity, DPS (see note 7).

133. Zubrzycki, "As Denver Public Schools Enrollment Booms."

By giving law enforcement personnel and school officials the tools to respond to negative student behavior without relying on overly punitive measures, Denver officials have charted promising alternatives to a school-to-prison pipeline. Coupled with support and follow-up from myriad community stakeholders, the Denver community as a whole has worked to ensure the highest possibility of success for all students in Denver Public Schools. As communities actively fight a legacy of excessive discipline policies and criminal justice practices that have harmed some of the most vulnerable student populations, jurisdictions seeking to reform school safety can look to Denver as a promising example.

Appendix A. Key Organizations, Stakeholders, and Documents

Numerous organizations and stakeholders collaborated to improve the safety and learning experience of students in Denver Public Schools while combating the school-to-prison pipeline affecting many school systems across the country. In addition, the time, expertise, and resources provided by these individuals and organizations was integral to this publication.

Organizations

- Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver
- City of Denver Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM)
- Colorado Department of Public Safety
- Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC)
- Denver District Attorney's Office
- Denver Juvenile Municipal Court
- Denver Juvenile Probation Department
- Denver Office of Children's Affairs
- Denver Police Department (DPD)
- Denver Public Schools (DPS)
- Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Denver Public Schools Office of Family and Community Engagement (FACE)
- Denver Public Schools Office of Post-Secondary Readiness
- Denver Public Schools Office of Social Emotional Learning
- Gang Rescue and Support (GRASP)
- Learn Your Rights in Colorado (LYRIC)
- My Brother's Keeper Denver
- Padres & Jóvenes Unidos (Parents and Young People United)
- Project Voices of Youth Changing Education (VOYCE)
- Promoting Academics and Character Education (PACE)
- Promoting Alternatives to Violence Through Education (PAVE)
- Shorter Community African Methodist Episcopal Church

- The Bridge Project
- Treatment Alternatives for Safer Communities (TASC)
- Youth Empowerment Support Services Institute (YESS)

Individual stakeholders

- Mike Acuna, City of Denver, Office of the Independent Monitor
- Steven Addison, Lieutenant, Denver Police Department
- John Avila, Officer, Denver Police Department
- Valerie Barrientos, Commander of Campus Safety Officers, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Shawn Bernard, Officer, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Richard Blea, Officer, Denver Police Department
- Ali Bradley, Student Facilitator
- Paul Burleson, Pastor, Citizen Oversight Board
- Sonja Chapman, Volunteer, Project VOYCE
- Shawn Cohn, Chief Probation Officer, Denver Juvenile Probation
- Jennifer Corvalan, Program Coordinator, Denver Juvenile Probation/TASC
- Barbara Downing, District Partner, Denver Public Schools
- Michael Eaton, Chief, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Jennifer Fratello, Policy Director, City of Denver, Office of the Independent Monitor
- Sarah Friend, Juvenile Court Liaison, Denver Public Schools, Office of Social Emotional Learning
- Kalina Gallardo, Student Facilitator
- Francisco “Cisco” Gallardo, Program Director, GRASP
- Lisa Garcia, Officer, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Yoni Geffen, District Coordinator, Parent Teacher Home Visit Program, Denver Public Schools
- Eldridge Greer, Associate Chief responsible for Student Equity and Opportunity, Denver Public Schools
- Robert Grossaint, Deputy Chief, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Derek Hawkins, Dean, Martin Luther King Jr. High School
- Patrick Hedrick, Deputy Director, Denver Public Safety Youth Programs
- Bernard Henry, Officer, Denver Police Department

- Gianina Horton, Youth Project Coordinator, City of Denver Office of the Independent Monitor
- Aviva Katz, Transitions Manager, Denver Public Schools Office of Post-Secondary Readiness
- Jason Klika, Sergeant, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Carlo Kriekels, Executive Director, YESS Institute
- Anna Lopez, Program Grant Manager, Colorado Department of Public Safety
- Benita Martin, Director, Juvenile Diversion, Denver District Attorney's Office
- Ricardo Martinez, Co-Executive Director, Padres & Jóvenes Unidos
- Landon Mascareñaz, Executive Director, Denver Public Schools, Office of Family and Community Engagement
- James Meskimen, CPI Coordinator, Denver Public Schools
- Megan Miccio, Education & Health Case Manager, The Bridge Project
- Nicholas Mitchell, Independent Monitor, City of Denver, Office of the Independent Monitor
- William Nagle, Captain, Denver Police Department
- Joel Pace, Youth Success Director, Denver Office of Children's Affairs
- Ann Padilla-Parras, Diversion Officer, Denver District Attorney's Office
- Cliff Paine, Operations Sergeant, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Jeanette Patterson, Ed.D., Project Coordinator, Shorter Community African Methodist Episcopal Church
- Paul Pazen, Commander, Denver Police Department
- Jann Peterson, Assistant Principal, Denver Public Schools
- Lisa Pisciotta, Denver Public Schools
- David Portillo, Program Manager, The Denver Foundation
- Hannah Seigel Proff, Founder, LYRIC
- Thomas Rooney, Officer, Denver Public Schools Department of Safety
- Lynn Schofield Clark, Professor, University of Denver
- Michael Simmons, Program Coordinator, My Brother's Keeper Denver
- Joseph Troyer, PACE Program Manager, Boys & Girls Club – Metro Denver
- Tim Turley, District Coordinator – Restorative Approaches, Denver Public Schools
- Diane Ulmer, Dean of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), North High School

Key documents

Denver District Attorney's Office

- Juvenile Diversion Client/Family Application
- Juvenile Diversion Program Summary

Denver Juvenile and Family Justice TASC project

- Law Enforcement Program Summary

Denver Office of Children's Affairs

- My Brother's Keeper Action Plan, June 2015

Denver Office of the Independent Monitor

- Bridging the Gap, Officer Evaluation Summary
- Bridging the Gap, Youth Evaluation Summary
- Semiannual Report 2016
- Youth Outreach Project, Bridging the Gap Forum Curriculum & Summary

Denver Police Department

- Intergovernmental Agreement Concerning the Funding, Implementation, and Administration of Programs Involving Police Officers in Schools

Denver Public Schools Department of Safety

- Campus Safety Division Standards of Service and Expectations

Denver Public Schools

- Mental Health and Assessment Services Discipline Best Practices Presentation
- Office of Social Emotional Learning Restorative Practices Training Manual
- Discipline Incident Report Template
- Discipline Ladder
- Discipline Matrix
- Functional Behavioral Assessment Support Plan Template

Appendix B. Denver Public Schools Discipline Matrix

Offense ²	Discipline Ladder Reference	Recommendation For Expulsion	Law Enforcement Referral
Type Five³ Robbery First or second degree assault Sale of unauthorized drugs or controlled substance Carrying, bringing, using, or possessing a knife or dangerous weapon without the authorization of the school or District Habitual disruption ⁴	N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A	Mandatory Mandatory Mandatory Mandatory Mandatory	Mandatory Mandatory Mandatory Mandatory No
Type Four Serious fighting (including incidents with significant injuries, but which do not rise to the level of the Type Five offense “1st or 2nd degree assault”) Terrorist threats (pending a threat assessment) Possession of an explosive that seriously endangers the welfare or safety of other students or school personnel Unlawful sexual conduct - see Policy JBB Willfully causing damage to the property of a school employee Assault, harassment, or false allegation of abuse against a school employee Hazing activities Other student behaviors that most seriously disrupt the school environment or seriously endanger the welfare or safety of other pupils or school personnel Recurring Type Three offenses ⁷	Level F Level F Level F Level F Level F Level F Level F Level F Level F	Optional Optional Optional Optional Optional Optional Optional Optional Optional	Optional ⁵ Optional ⁵ Optional ⁵ Optional ⁵ Mandatory ⁶ Mandatory ⁶ Optional ⁵ Optional ⁵ Optional ⁵
Type Three Severe bullying - see Policy JICDE Severe harassment based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or religion - see Policy JBBA Severe sexual harassment - see Policy JBB Low-level fighting (may include incidents that result in minor injuries like cuts, scrapes, and bloody noses, etc.) Being under the influence of drugs or alcohol - see Policies JICH, JICH-R Possession of unauthorized drugs or alcohol Destruction of school property, including graffiti (\$500 and over) Theft (\$500 and over) Other school-based misconduct that substantially disrupts the school environment Recurring Type Two offenses	Level E Level E Level E Level E Level E Level E Level E Level E Level E	No No No No No No No No No	No No No No No Optional ⁵ Optional ⁵ Optional ⁵ No
Type Two False activation of a fire alarm Minor bullying - see Policy JICDE Minor harassment based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or religion - see Policy JBBA Destruction of school property, including graffiti (under \$500) Severe defiance of authority/disobedience Trespassing Theft (under \$500) Minor sexual harassment - see Policy JBB Other school-based misconduct that disrupts the school environment Recurring Type One offenses (after going through Levels A through C of the Discipline Ladder)	Level D Level D Level D Level D Level D Level D Level D Level D Level D	No No No No No No No No No	No ⁸ No No No No No No No No
Type One Classroom disruption Excessive tardiness Picking on, bothering, or distracting other students Use of profanity or vulgarity Dress code violation - see Policy JICA Disrupting school activity Minor defiance of authority/disobedience Verbal insults or put-downs Use of cell phones, gameboys, and similar electronic devices at unauthorized times Minor damage or defacement of school property Tobacco offenses - see Policy JICG Unauthorized use of school equipment Gambling Physical aggression with another student (e.g., pushing, shoving) Scholastic dishonesty Other minor school-based misconduct	Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C Levels A-C	No No No No No No No No No No No No No No No No	No No No No No No No No No No No No No No No No

¹ Note that this sheet is merely a summary of Section Three of Policy JK-R. Please refer to the full policy for more detail.

² Gang-related activity at school is covered under the offenses listed in Type One through Type Five.

³ The consequences listed for Type Five offenses are required under state law.

⁴ “Habitual disruption” is not an independent offense, but rather refers to a classification under state law in which persistent misconduct at any level can result in the student being declared “habitually disruptive,” for which the student will be recommended for expulsion. See Section 4-2 of Policy JK-R for more information.

⁵ For these offenses, incidents are to be resolved without the involvement of law enforcement whenever possible. See Section 7-3 of Policy JK-R for more information.

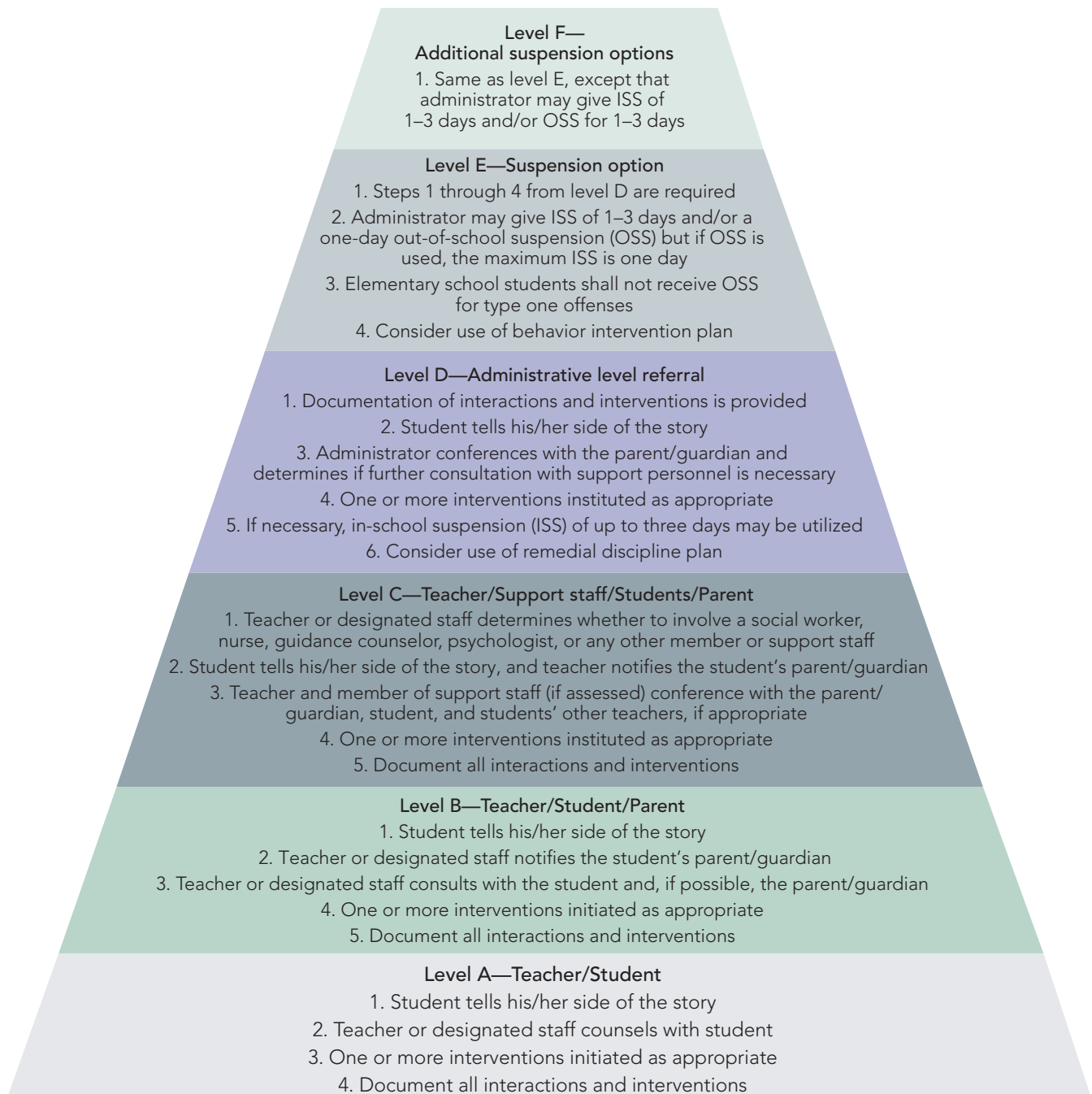
⁶ Mandatory referral to law enforcement for these offenses is required under state law.

⁷ Recurring Type One offenses can eventually proceed to Type Two and Type Three, but shall never result in referral to law enforcement.

⁸ Referral to the fire department is required.

* The Principal retains the right to take appropriate action to ensure the safety of the school, its students and staff.

Appendix C. Denver Public Schools Discipline Ladder



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The Denver Police Department, Denver Public Schools (DPS), and several Denver metropolitan community-based organizations have built a collaborative approach to school safety and youth development designed to end the “school-to-prison pipeline,” improve school safety, and engage students with discipline issues. DPS, school resource officers (SRO), and social service providers collaborate to establish positive relationships with students, prioritize student well-being, and involve the criminal justice system only as a last resort. The report identifies promising practices and lessons learned in their approach: prevention, intervention, and reengagement.



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