

Law Enforcement

Snapshots from the Safe Schools/ Healthy Students Initiative

**Law Enforcement:
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Introduction

Safe schools—where students are valued, are physically and emotionally safe, and feel like they belong¹—are imperative for nurturing the academic, social, and emotional development of children and youth. Safe schools do not focus singularly on preventing school violence, but rather on creating an overall welcoming, inclusive, and secure school climate. **Safe, protective environments are conducive to learning^{2,3} and result in positive outcomes that support academic achievement.**

The “safety-learning connection” is clear: When children feel safe in their schools, they are better able to engage in academics and interact positively with peers and teachers. Making schools safer results in increased student attendance and lower dropout rates, which in turn leads to increases in achievement and reductions in grade repeating.^{4,5} Safe schools also allow teachers and administrators to focus on academics, foster positive relationships between students and staff, and promote meaningful parent and community involvement.⁶

Threats to school safety include behaviors such as alcohol and other drug use, fighting, aggression, bullying, violence, gang activity, weapon carrying, theft, vandalism, and self-destructive behavior,⁷ all of which create an unfavorable environment for academic success. Students who report feeling unsafe in class have consistently lower test scores and higher rates of absence, **truancy**,* suspension and expulsion, substance abuse, and mental health issues.⁸ Likewise, in schools where violence and unsafe student behavior are the norm, teachers and administrators spend valuable time disciplining students instead of teaching.

We know kids can't learn unless they feel safe at school.

—Becky Hoffman, Safe Schools/Healthy Students project director of Adams 12 Five Star Schools, Thornton, Colorado

There are ways to change the downward trajectory of unsafe school environments and resulting negative consequences. Engaging local law enforcement in a positive and productive manner in school safety initiatives is one tactic to improve the safety of schools and their surrounding neighborhoods. To this end, school-community partnerships are increasingly involving local law enforcement in school safety promotion and violence prevention initiatives.

Historically, some school districts and law enforcement agencies have faced challenges in partnering on school safety work. While the mission of schools is to help children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, school administrators sometimes view the school district and law enforcement as working at cross-purposes, with law enforcement punishing youth who are engaged in risky behaviors and shepherding them into the juvenile justice system. Conversely, in some cases, school personnel have misused law enforcement, calling the police to deal with minor disciplinary infractions, rather than handling those issues themselves.

* **Blue bolded terms** are defined in the Glossary at the end of this Snapshot.

However, high-profile violent school events over the last two decades have led many school administrators and law enforcement agencies to agree that school safety is a concern in *every* community and no one entity should assume sole responsibility for keeping students safe. **Creating and maintaining safe schools ideally involves a broad-based collaboration of educators, students, parents, and community organizations, with law enforcement as one of the crucial partners.**

Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, Law Enforcement, and School Safety

Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) communities exemplify the valuable role law enforcement can play in making schools safer. Since 1999, 365 SS/HS communities across the country have been funded** to address the underlying factors that contribute to school violence, student substance use, mental health challenges, school dropout, suspension, and expulsion.

Each SS/HS community is required to form a collaborative partnership among the local education agency and mental health, juvenile justice, law enforcement, and other community organizations. Together, they implement a comprehensive plan of activities, services, and strategies intended to promote healthy development and academic success, while also ensuring that students and their families feel connected to their school and community.

To ensure a comprehensive approach that builds on the strengths of the community partners, SS/HS grantees integrate five core elements into their project. One of the five elements is focused on creating safe and violence-free schools.***

National evaluation data from the Fiscal Year (FY) 2005–2006 SS/HS grantees show that this focus on promoting safe school environments has had a positive effect on SS/HS sites. Key findings include:

- A 17 percent decrease in violent incidents in schools
- An 11 percent decline in the number of students who reported experiencing violence at school (usually in the form of physical fights)⁹
- 90 percent of school staff stating that SS/HS improved school safety
- 90 percent of school staff reporting less violence on school campuses as a result of SS/HS
- 80 percent of school staff asserting that SS/HS reduced community violence¹⁰

The active participation of local law enforcement was a key ingredient in these outcomes. “We united the mental health, law enforcement, and school staff in the very beginning of our SS/HS work because findings from the **Secret Service Safe School Initiative** showed that when you have a collaborative group from multiple disciplines that meets together . . . the chances of an incident being averted increase dramatically as compared to having mental health, law enforcement, and school administrators meet separately,” says Melynn Huntley, Amarillo Independent School District’s SS/HS project director. **“There is power in a group intervention versus individuals acting separately.”**

Partnership among schools, law enforcement, juvenile justice, and mental health brings four different cultures together, presenting both challenges and opportunities to learn. The partnership is strongest when the roles of all participants are defined by a single outcome—student success.

—Dr. Joseph Christy,
director of the Washington County
Juvenile Department in Hillsboro, Oregon

** The Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative is funded by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), Education (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools), and Justice (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention).

*** The other four SS/HS elements are (1) preventing and reducing alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, (2) enhancing early childhood social and emotional learning and development, (3) enhancing mental, emotional, and behavioral health, and (4) connecting families, schools, and communities.



Key Strategies for Partnering with Law Enforcement

In the spring of 2013, the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, which provides training and technical assistance to SS/HS communities nationwide, gathered information about and interviewed 11 SS/HS grantees from FY 2003–2008 to learn more about their experiences partnering with law enforcement. **This Snapshot explores the key components of effective school-community and law enforcement partnerships as well as the various positive roles law enforcement can play in school safety initiatives, featuring these examples and lessons learned from SS/HS initiative.**

“The SS/HS initiative served as a catalyst to create a relationship with the juvenile justice office, the police department, the sheriff’s department, and the school district,” says Liza Andrew-Miller, the SS/HS project director for Hillsboro School District 1J. “Personal relationship-building at a leadership level is the most important thing in school safety work. Having mutual respect in relationships where you can really talk about issues is key.”

SS/HS communities have employed a variety of strategies to successfully partner with law enforcement to achieve the shared goal of safer school environments and positive school climates. While the role of law enforcement varies in each SS/HS community, several key strategies contributed to improved school safety outcomes.

Law Enforcement Agencies That Participate in SS/HS Initiatives

The School Police Department

- A police department based within a school, typically a branch or unit of another law enforcement agency, such as the local police or sheriff’s office
- Responds to crime and delinquency occurring on school grounds and works with school officials to manage school security, develop crisis responses, and prepare for emergencies

The Local Police Department

- The local law enforcement agency
- Responsible for upholding the law within municipal boundaries, including schools

The Sherriff’s Department

- The county-level law enforcement agency
- Its powers, responsibilities, and jurisdiction vary by state and county

The District Attorney’s Office

- The lead law enforcer within a jurisdiction that works closely with municipal, county, and state police
- Investigates county-level crimes and determines which crimes to prosecute

Juvenile Court

- Handles offenses committed by juveniles who have not committed crimes that require adult prosecution

The Probation Department

- Law enforcement officials
- Supervises the release of offenders for a period of time that is determined by the court at sentencing, and arrests and refers offenders back to court who have violated the terms of their probation

Strategy 1: Law Enforcement Plays a Lead Role in School-Community Partnerships

Many SS/HS grantees found that law enforcement fulfilled a variety of roles in school safety initiatives, including:

- **Working to keep students out of the juvenile justice system** and in school through **diversion programs**
- **Engaging youth** in the planning and implementation of evidence-based **juvenile delinquency** and violence prevention programming
- **Serving in schools** by educating staff and mentoring youth
- **Developing and implementing school safety strategies**, including crisis assessment, management, and response
- **Involving parents and the community** in youth safety by sharing information on such topics as delinquency, truancy, bullying, and illicit drug use

“The SS/HS initiative has allowed us to really dream about the ideal way for schools and law enforcement to work together,” says Jenée Littrell, the SS/HS project director for Grossmont Union High School. “And it challenged us to change. We now understand that we [schools and law enforcement] have the same mission—to keep students safe, on campus and in the community, so they can succeed—and we work as a team to protect and support our students.”

It can be challenging to launch a school-community and law enforcement partnership, in part because educators and law enforcement professionals have different responsibilities, expectations, and protocols. **SS/HS grantees overcame these challenges through frequent communication and development of a shared mission and vision for school safety, reinforcing that everyone is working toward common goals.**

Grossmont Union High School District—La Mesa, California (FY 2007)

Partnering to Prevent Victimization

The Grossmont Union High School District’s partnership with law enforcement began in 2001, when **School Resource Officers (SROs)** were placed in district schools following two local school shootings. At the beginning of the SS/HS initiative, the school district created an information sharing agreement enabling law enforcement, mental health providers, and school staff to share information about students without violating confidentiality laws. The school district and law enforcement then worked together to uncover and tackle the recruitment of students as commercial sex workers (also known as Commercial Exploitation of Children or CSEC) in the neighborhoods surrounding the school.

“We are now able to identify both CSEC victims and students at risk for CSEC early,” says Jenée Littrell, SS/HS project director. “We have a good framework to engage students and ask them questions in a way that they don’t shut down. In addition, we know how to get them services, how to pull in their parents, and how to get them prevention training so they can learn how to avoid recruitment as commercial sex workers.”

Strategy 2: Law Enforcement Helps Plan and Implement Youth Safety Initiatives

School-community partnerships that actively engage law enforcement are ideally suited for planning and implementing school safety activities. While schools contribute a strong foundation in child and adolescent development, law enforcement’s understanding of delinquency prevention and community safety can guide the group’s approach to goal setting for youth safety. Community organizations, such as local mental health agencies,

further safety efforts by serving as points of referral for students and families in need, while juvenile justice agencies can help prevent youth from becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

In many SS/HS partnerships, law enforcement played a lead role in youth safety and delinquency prevention programming by training school staff in school safety and evidence-based violence prevention programming, participating on school safety teams, and serving on truancy reduction task forces.

Hillsboro District 1J—Hillsboro, Oregon (FY 2005)

Addressing Truancy Early

The Hillsboro School District 1J's (HSD1J's) overhaul of its truancy prevention approach resulted in improved attendance, decreased drop-out rates, and reduced rates of violence. Led by the juvenile justice agency, HSD1J partnered with the police department and Sheriff's Office to develop a comprehensive protocol for tracking and intervening with youth struggling with attendance. School staff reviewed tardiness and attendance data to identify students who had missed several days of school and met with the students who were deemed truant. When a greater level of intervention was needed, "care teams"—multi-disciplinary teams including mental health, the county juvenile department, and law enforcement partners—developed an individualized plan for the student and monitored the student's progress as the plan was implemented.

The school district has seen positive results. For example, the district's Century High School's involvement in the truancy initiative led to a 77 percent decrease in the school's drop-out rate, from 3.2 percent in 2005–2006 to 0.75 percent in 2008–2009.

Kern County Superintendent of Schools—Bakersfield, California (FY 2008)

Preventing Unexcused Absences

Prior to receiving the SS/HS grant, Kern County Schools partnered with the Kern County Sheriff's Office to operate the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) program in an effort to improve school attendance. SS/HS funding allowed the school district and the Sheriff's Office to solidify this existing positive relationship and expand the SARB program.

SARB is intended to help students with three or more unexcused absences (i.e., absentee students) improve their attendance. An absentee student and his or her parents are called in for a meeting with SARB, whose members include the Sheriff's Deputy, school administrators, a school counselor, and, as needed, a school-based mental health provider, a probation officer, or a school nurse. Because reasons for students' absences can vary greatly, SARB takes an individualized approach to each case. During the meeting, SARB members guide the student toward programs and services, such as individual or group counseling, that can help him or her improve attendance and thrive in school.

Kern County schools saw a reduction in unexcused absences, with a decrease of 16 percent in one school district and 20 percent in another. In addition, the number of students missing more than 10 days of school per year decreased dramatically across the county.

Strategy 3: Law Enforcement Creates Linkages among Schools and Other Community Agencies

Community partnerships can be strengthened by linking schools, community child-serving agencies (including mental health providers and juvenile justice representatives), and local law enforcement. As an example, law enforcement can identify where their roles as police officers intersect with school and other community agency staff and find ways for these groups to work effectively together to better serve students. Law enforcement can also work with children who have witnessed or are victims of crimes or violence, ensuring they are safe and connecting them to support services.¹¹ Similarly, in rural communities, law enforcement agencies often serve as first responders to students experiencing mental health crises. Clear protocols and training can teach law enforcement, school leaders, and mental health providers about each other's disciplines and how to collaborate to serve children and families, increasing the overall effectiveness of school safety initiatives.

Law enforcement can create new relationships between schools and other community agencies. In Pueblo City Schools in Colorado, school-based law enforcement staff established a partnership with mental health providers to decrease emergency psychiatric hospitalizations for students. When an officer knows that a student has made a threat to himself or others, the officer meets with school-based mental health providers. The mental health provider immediately connects the student to a therapist who conducts an assessment and develops a treatment plan.

In some SS/HS communities, law enforcement facilitated communication regarding students reentering school after being released from a juvenile detention facility, thereby ensuring that school and juvenile justice staff are informed of the student's progress.

Law enforcement also can share data with schools and community agencies about students, their families, and the services they receive,

in order to serve students and prevent them from "falling through the cracks." Information sharing among agencies also saves resources by avoiding service duplication, and can motivate communities to become involved in prevention work. As an example, SS/HS grantee Adams 12 Five Star Schools shared data regarding high rates of youth marijuana use to encourage law enforcement personnel and youth to join a marijuana reduction initiative. "We should not be afraid to use data as a tool to mobilize communities," says SS/HS Project Director Becky Hoffman.

School and law enforcement partners may face challenges with information sharing. It is important to understand the laws regarding student privacy, parental consent, information sharing, and confidentiality so that all partners can strategize ways to share student data in a legal, responsible manner. Learn more about information sharing at <http://sshs.promoteprevent.org/nis>



The Role of Law Enforcement in School Safety

School safety requires schools and community organizations to work together. The SS/HS initiative has shown how law enforcement can be a leading contributor to school safety work. Law enforcement officers' first role in school safety is carrying out their sworn duty to enforce the law. **Effectively engaging law enforcement expands this role to include delinquency prevention and mitigation, student and community engagement, and safety planning.**

This section of the Snapshot describes the range of responsibilities of law enforcement in SS/HS initiatives. The following functions are not mutually exclusive, as law enforcement in SS/HS sites fill many of these roles.

Diversion Programming

Several SS/HS sites' law enforcement partners implement diversion programming to help youth who have had contact with police avoid further involvement with the juvenile justice system. Law enforcement officers trained in diversion can play a powerful role in getting students the help they need.

The rationale behind diversion programming is that involvement in the juvenile justice system may stigmatize youth and cause more harm than good, and that minor offenses—such as trespassing, shoplifting, and curfew violations—are better handled outside of the justice system.¹² Moreover, involvement in the juvenile justice system increases the odds of involvement with the adult justice system.^{13,14}

Most diversion programs are highly personalized. Examples of diversion programs include counseling and education, community service, restitution, job training, **youth courts**, and victim-offender mediation, all of which provide youth offenders with a range of support.

Diversion programs aim to help at-risk youth:

- Engage in positive, constructive behaviors
- Make changes early to avoid progressing to more serious offenses
- Avert the negative consequences associated with juvenile justice involvement
- Receive appropriate individual and family social services¹⁵

Grossmont Union High School District—La Mesa, California (FY 2007)

Conducting Curfew Sweeps

Grossmont Union High School District partners with law enforcement to enforce the community's 10 p.m. curfew for minors. During curfew sweeps, law enforcement identifies students who are out past curfew and takes them to a school where school staff members evaluate and connect them with appropriate services (e.g., mental health counseling, substance abuse services, diversion programs). These sweeps also help law enforcement identify students involved in Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) and those engaged in underage drinking or substance abuse, connecting them with appropriate counseling and other services. SS/HS Project Director Jenée Littrell explains that the goal of the curfew sweep program is "to put students on a diversion track, not to criminalize them."

Pittsfield Public Schools—Pittsfield, Massachusetts (FY 2005)

Providing an Array of Services to At-Risk Students through a Juvenile Resource Center

Prior to receiving their SS/HS grant, Pittsfield Public Schools (PPS) was experiencing rising rates of suspension and students on probation. Because these students were less likely to graduate, the school district recognized a need to provide supports to prevent students from dropping out of school and to divert them from the juvenile justice system. In partnership with the Pittsfield Sheriff's Office, PPS's Juvenile Resource Center (JRC), established in 2002, provides a place for suspended students and those on probation to receive tutoring, counseling services, and life-skills training, and to complete school assignments. SS/HS funds awarded in 2005 further enabled the JRC to add after-school and summer programs, and through collaboration with mental health and education partners, expand its counseling and tutoring services. "The JRC efforts proved successful," says SS/HS Project Director Alicia Couture. "Ninety percent of the students who attended the JRC graduated from high school."

Montgomery County Public Schools—Rockville, Maryland (FY 2003)

Training Youth as Leaders through Teen Courts

The Montgomery County's Teen Court program reduces juvenile offenses while also offering youth educational and leadership opportunities. This program is a collaborative effort of the school district, County Police Department, State's Attorney Office, County Health Department, and Maryland Department of Juvenile Justice.

The police department refers offenders ages 12 to 17 to Teen Court. High school students, trained by volunteer attorneys, serve as jurors, clerks, and bailiffs. The students hear their peers' cases and determine appropriate sanctions such as counseling, education, community service hours, and Teen Court jury duty. Volunteer Circuit, District, and Special Appeals judges provide answers to legal questions.

According to Georgine DeBord, Montgomery County Teen Court coordinator, staff members also screen participants for substance abuse and mental health concerns, and incorporate appropriate treatment and education into the diversion process. "This allows law enforcement and treatment providers to work together to address the needs of the juvenile offender," says Ms. DeBord. "Using **restorative justice** principles, juvenile offenders are better equipped to repair harm and become productive members of society if we help them deal with substance abuse and mental health issues. We can reduce recidivism by giving them the tools they need for success."

Juvenile offenders' charges are dismissed after they complete Teen Court. In 2010, 35 adult and 130 youth volunteers oversaw 390 cases with a successful completion rate of 84 percent.

Youth Engagement

Rather than seeing students as the problem when it comes to delinquency and violence, local law enforcement in many SS/HS sites involve youth voices as part of the solution. **SS/HS sites have found that engaging youth helps create positive school climates and improves relationships between law enforcement and students.** Youth engagement programs run by law enforcement include youth motivation, empowerment, outreach, and education programs. For instance, law enforcement can involve youth in planning and implementing violence prevention initiatives. Youth who engage with law enforcement in positive ways from an early age may learn to more fully engage with their society and develop respect for authority and the law.¹⁶

Rochester City School District—Rochester, New York (FY 2008)

Engaging Youth in School Safety

Rochester City School District assigned School Safety Officers (SSOs) to 12 public secondary schools to actively engage youth and promote positive relationships through various activities. As part of a Youth Engagement Team, SSOs and youth worked together to improve school climate and safety, and discussed how to improve student interactions with the SSOs and other law enforcement officers. According to the school district's Director of Safety and Security, Lori Baldwin, these meetings provided the opportunity for students to speak openly with SSOs, giving SSOs a better understanding of their lives and fostering trusting relationships between SSOs and students.

SSOs work hard to promote positive behavior among students. In the "Positive Tickets" campaign implemented by SROs in conjunction with the Youth Voice, One Vision Youth Council and the City Recreation Department, SSOs reward students who are caught engaging in positive acts, such as turning in a wallet, mediating a problem between students, or reporting a dangerous situation. Students can redeem tickets for retail gift cards or tickets to local events. Congratulatory letters notify parents that the SSO has rewarded their child for contributing to a safe and positive school environment.

The school district found that engaging youth with law enforcement improved school safety by promoting positive relationships, reducing student suspensions and arrests, and increasing student reports of criminality and dangerous activities. The SS/HS project director, Chris Dandino, reported that from the 2008–2009 to 2011–2012 school years, student arrests in school decreased by nearly 73 percent and long-term suspensions decreased nearly 81 percent.

School Resource Officers

Law enforcement staff members who become School Resource Officers (SROs) can take a comprehensive approach to school safety and delinquency reduction by working in partnership with schools. SROs are law enforcement officials selected and trained to work specifically in schools. The use of SROs has increased dramatically in recent years—38 percent from 1997 to 2007¹⁷—and nearly half of all public schools in the U.S. have assigned SROs.¹⁸

SROs assume multiple functions, fulfilling the roles of educator, informal counselor, and law enforcement officer.¹⁹ The amount of time an SRO spends on each activity varies greatly from school to school and within a school year, depending on the needs that arise.

A clear Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that spells out the roles and responsibilities of the SRO and the school district can solidify a common purpose and vision.

Several SS/HS grantees note that implementing SRO programs improved their overall school climate, and that students' sense of safety and security in schools increased because they were confident that SROs could effectively manage difficult or potentially dangerous situations. Ken Ketzler, the police chief in Decatur, Indiana, where the North Adams Community Schools SS/HS site is located, reflects on how school climate has changed as a result of the presence of SROs: "When I talk to counselors and others in the schools, they say that the whole demeanor of the schools has changed. Rather than students trying to see how much they can get away with, schools have become more of a learning environment."

SROs can serve as educators in schools, providing in-service training for school staff on evidence-based violence prevention programs and educating students "on the fundamental principles and skills needed to become responsible citizens"²⁰ by teaching them about the legal consequences of negative behaviors. Additionally, SROs can provide presentations on topics such as alcohol and other drug awareness, gangs, personal safety, and sexual assault. SROs can also train parents on issues that may affect their children and adolescents, such as cyberbullying and substance abuse prevention.

Pueblo City Schools—Pueblo, Colorado (FY 2008)

School Resource Officers Acting as Leaders and Educators

Pueblo City Schools has a strong, long-standing relationship with both the Pueblo Police Department and school district SROs, who are jointly funded by the schools and police department. When the school district began its SS/HS initiative, Deputy Chief of the Pueblo Police Department Troy Davenport became the chair of the SS/HS Core Management Team, further solidifying this partnership and creating a truly shared initiative.

This collaborative approach paved the way for the successful engagement of SROs in the school district. SROs frequently intervened in conflicts between students (e.g., physical fights, bullying, online harassment). When there was a particularly disturbing or violent event locally or nationally, the SROs provided accurate information, dispelled misconceptions, and helped maintain calm in the schools. Deputy Chief Davenport describes the strong support for SROs throughout the district: "None of our schools would want to function without their SROs because they are such a crucial resource for administrators and students alike."

SROs also act as informal counselors and mentors. SROs can build trusting relationships with students, helping them form a more positive view of law enforcement. When students have a constructive opinion of SROs, they are more likely to feel safe in school.²¹ When students trust SROs in their schools, they are more likely to share information about potential school safety issues. This enables SROs to connect students in-need to services and investigate safety concerns.

Kern County Superintendent of Schools—Bakersfield, California (FY 2008)

Engaging Students and Parents with SROs

In Kern County Schools, SROs mingle with students during recess, attend community activities, and facilitate parent meetings. This visible role helps parents and students view the SROs as part of the community. Parents and students feel comfortable alerting SROs to potentially dangerous situations, such as fights, thereby enabling SROs to intervene before situations escalate. According to SS/HS Project Director Jeff Coomber, “For SROs, it’s more advantageous to engage with parents and students to improve relationships rather than waiting for a crisis to occur.”

To carefully select well-suited SROs, the school district created a job description with very clear expectations and qualifications, including the ability to be empathetic with students and gain their respect. Once they are on the job, SROs work closely with a senior officer to become familiar with the students, the school, and the community, and determine where their efforts are most needed.

North Adams Community Schools—Decatur, Indiana (FY 2008)

Building Relationships with Students

Prior to SS/HS grant funding, one SRO served all of the schools in North Adams Community Schools’ three districts, working at each campus on a part-time basis. SS/HS funding allowed the districts to hire two additional SROs, providing each district with a designated SRO. Since the schools were already accustomed to having an SRO on a part-time basis, they welcomed the opportunity to work with a full-time SRO. The original SRO noted that by committing his time to one district, he was able to build stronger, more trusting relationships with the students. In turn, students began to feel more comfortable coming to the SRO to share information and voice concerns.

In one example, a student approached a trusted SRO to ask for help with drug addiction. The SRO connected the student with a school counselor and continued to meet with him regularly to provide support. The student’s relationship with the SRO served as the catalyst for him to receive critical treatment. With continued support from the SRO and the school counselor, the student has been drug-free for over a year.

Selecting and Training SROs

Before being assigned as an SRO in the district, candidates must have at least five years’ experience as law enforcement officers serving communities. Indiana also requires SROs to undergo a yearly two-day training to ensure that the officers are well equipped to serve in schools. In addition, Charlie Cook, an SRO for North Adams Community Schools, founded an Indiana SRO association that regularly holds statewide conferences where SROs can network and receive training.

Safety and Crisis Planning and Intervention

Law enforcement is an integral partner in many communities’ school safety and crisis planning and intervention efforts and, as such, can play a key role in how schools prevent, prepare for, and respond to crises and threats.

Law enforcement seeks to avert school crises and delinquency through safety planning. Safety planning involves law enforcement working with school administrators to identify factors in the physical, social, and academic

environments that may influence school safety. Working with school personnel, law enforcement can analyze the school's *physical environment* and work to make it safer (e.g., by increasing lighting, limiting and monitoring entrances and exits, or increasing signage).

Law enforcement can assess and modify factors in the *social environment* that can influence safety, beginning with administering school climate surveys to identify student and staff safety and security concerns, such as bullying. They can then work to improve the social environment in the school by communicating to students and staff the expectation that the school is a safe and orderly environment, educating students and staff about appropriate behavior, and explaining the consequences of breaking school rules and laws.

Although no one can guarantee that a school will never experience a tragedy, school officials should be able to identify specific, balanced, and comprehensive steps that they have taken to reduce the risks of such an incident occurring and to prepare to manage a serious incident effectively.²³

—Proactive School Security and Emergency Preparedness Planning

Finally, law enforcement can make a substantive contribution to the *academic environment* by teaching law-related topics and facilitating existing programs (e.g., peer mediation and conflict mediation programs, youth substance abuse and violence prevention programs, youth community service programs, and delinquency prevention programs).²²

Hillsboro District 1J—Hillsboro, Oregon (FY 2005)

Assessing School Safety and Planning for Emergencies

Based on an initial site safety analysis, SROs alerted the school district about the urgent need to focus on improving school safety. Using the safety analysis data, the school district applied for and received a Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Working closely with law enforcement, the school district conducted a comprehensive safety assessment of the district's buildings, creating computerized mapping and a communication system to better prepare the district for emergency response. In addition, law enforcement conducted exterior building assessments, which led to improved fencing, signage, pathways, and door locking systems.

Pueblo City Schools—Pueblo, Colorado (FY 2008)

Preventing Crises and Improving School Safety

Monthly crisis management meetings have transformed Pueblo City School's approach to crisis prevention. At these meetings, school administrators, law enforcement, and SS/HS Project Director Randy Evetts come together to assess current safety plans and procedures. Because of the SS/HS initiative and the partnership with law enforcement, schools are able to conduct surprise lockdown drills and feel more prepared for a variety of crises. Law enforcement and the school district also engage in joint safety training and have improved school security by protecting school data and limiting physical access to school buildings through the use of a visitors' log.

Law enforcement is a chief contributor to school crisis management teams. In this role, **members of law enforcement can lead the development of crisis management procedures** by:

- **Creating protocols** for responding to different types of emergencies
- **Designing incident-response systems to include emergency response plans**
- **Training school staff** in crisis management procedures
- **Establishing procedures for transferring leadership** from school personnel to law enforcement during crises
- **Working with schools to practice and refine crisis management protocols**, such as lockdowns and evacuations

Amarillo Independent School District—Amarillo, Texas (FY 2008)

Assessing and Managing Threats

When a student's mother presented a school counselor with a disturbing set of her child's drawings depicting violent scenes and a potential shooting, this school district realized that they were unprepared to assess and respond to potential student threats. In response, school district officials built on an established relationship with the local police department to create a formalized process for threat assessment and management. School mental health staff and the school liaison officer (another term for a School Resource Officer) worked together to assess reported threats and determine if other professionals—such as juvenile probation or child protective services—should be involved. Following the assessment, the officials decided on an appropriate intervention that considers the particular student's current and past behavior in school and at home. This allows the team to connect the student with counseling services, make changes to existing behavioral intervention plans, engage parents, or in rare cases, obtain parental permission to search a student's room or computer.

After the threat management procedures were implemented, the actual number of threat reports increased. Amarillo's Assistant Police Chief Perry Gilmore explained, "Threat assessment is the art of identifying false alarms, so that we don't have a real incident." Counseling services have also increased, with more students getting needed mental health supports. Recently, a child presented a graphic, violent drawing to his art teacher who reported it to the response team. The team discovered that the child was angry at a family member, not the school. "He just needed someone to talk to," reports SS/HS Project Director Melynn Huntley. "The student received counseling services and is now doing well."

Notably, students are feeling safer at school. In 2013, 20 percent fewer students reported missing school because they did not feel safe *in school*, and 40 percent fewer students reported missing school because they did not feel safe *travelling to or from school*.

Adams 12 Five Star Schools—Thornton, Colorado (FY 2007)

Planning and Responding to Crises

During its SS/HS funding, the Adams 12 Five Star Schools (also known as the Adams County Youth Initiative) implemented a countywide plan for crisis response and threat assessment in collaboration with local law enforcement. While safety plans existed in the schools prior to SS/HS funding, the plans varied greatly from school to school and lacked strong support from law enforcement.

Law enforcement personnel chaired the Crisis Response Planning Committee, bringing representatives from each school district, local law enforcement agencies, and emergency management together to create a comprehensive and unified crisis response plan for schools across the county. The school district and community partners created school safety DVDs outlining standardized lockdown and locked-out drill procedures. Principals and school staff members also engaged in regular training on crisis response protocols, increasing staff familiarity and comfort with emergency procedures. Between the start of the crisis response and safety planning efforts in 2008 and the end of the SS/HS grant in 2012, the district noted a 31 percent increase in the number of school staff members who reported that their school was “very well prepared” for emergency drills and exercises.²⁴

Parent and Community Engagement

School and law enforcement partnerships require positive relationships with parents and community groups. Engaging parents and communities in school safety improves the quality of life where students live and learn. **Law enforcement can engage families and community agencies as active partners in developing innovative, sustainable, systemwide changes that can reduce and prevent delinquency and violence in and around schools.**

Engaging *parents* in school safety initiatives enables parents to share their perspectives, builds trust, and creates support for school safety work. Law enforcement can engage parents in safety planning and have them participate on school safety task forces. Law enforcement also can engage parents by speaking about school safety issues at Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. For example, presenting to parents about bullying prevention helps law enforcement and schools establish a climate where bullying and aggression are not tolerated.

Engaging *communities*, such as local businesses and civic groups, can help build political will and financial support for school safety initiatives. Community groups can also act as key stakeholders in developing effective strategies to prevent delinquency and violence; law enforcement can keep communities abreast of local safety issues, and in turn, community members will have an open line of communication with law enforcement about their safety concerns or observations.

Law enforcement can engage community groups by presenting about their safety work at community advisory group meetings and submitting articles and op-ed pieces about school and community safety to local newspapers. Once law enforcement develops and fosters positive relationships with parents and communities, it can call on these constituencies to assist in resolving problems that contribute to school violence and delinquency (e.g., potential gang activity, drug sales, youth loitering in public areas).

Finally, building relationships by engaging parents and the community helps law enforcement, including SROs, serve as liaisons to these groups, schools, and community service organizations. Law enforcement can act as an intermediary between schools and local businesses with regard to safety issues in the neighborhoods surrounding schools and can help parents of at-risk students connect with appropriate school- and community-based services, including school guidance counselors and community mental health counselors.²⁵

Farmington Municipal Schools—Farmington, New Mexico (FY 2007)

Engaging Parents in Safety Planning

In Farmington Municipal Schools, law enforcement and school staff engage parents in school safety planning. When conducting safety drills in schools, principals send out notices to student's homes, post the information on the school website, and notify parents by phone. This process leads to an increased awareness of SROs' role on school campuses. Gaining parents' buy-in is crucial. Prior to the safety planning initiative, many parents did not realize that the district even had SROs. Having parents involved makes them more familiar with SROs' work and increases the likelihood that parents will become advocates for sustaining and expanding the SRO program in the schools.

SROs also sponsor evening parent safety meetings where they speak to parents about the schools' safety planning progress and strategies for improving school safety. Involving parents has increased parental understanding of the role of SROs and how the involvement of law enforcement in schools promotes the safety and well-being of students. Farmington law enforcement plans to recruit parents, grandparents, and other relatives of students to serve as extra sets of eyes on campuses to assist SROs in maintaining safe school environments.



Conclusion

SS/HS grantees from around the country are successfully engaging law enforcement as partners in creating safe, nurturing school environments. **The SS/HS sites profiled in this Snapshot demonstrate how shared leadership, thoughtful safety assessment and planning, and increased linkages between the school and community have contributed to positive school environments.**

These successes can serve as a model for other school districts and communities. By working collaboratively and learning to bridge divergent perspectives and approaches, schools and law enforcement together can have a positive impact on students, decreasing delinquent and unsafe behaviors, diverting youth from the juvenile justice system, helping plan for crises, and contributing to safer school environments where students can learn and thrive.



Diversion Programs

Youth diversion programs aim to divert youth offenders from the juvenile justice system. Rather than formally prosecuting or sanctioning offenders, diversion programs mandate services such as individual and family counseling, peer courts (or teen courts), and academic support, as well as requiring restitution or community service to prevent more serious interventions. Probation officers meet with youth enrolled in diversion programs to track their progress. Youth who comply with the requirements of a diversion program can avoid adjudication or more intensive sanctions, like juvenile detention.²⁶

Juvenile Delinquency

Juvenile delinquency generally refers to a juvenile (minor) committing an offense considered criminal if perpetrated by an adult. A juvenile found to have committed delinquent acts by a juvenile court is not found “guilty,” but is instead “delinquent.”²⁷

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is an approach that emphasizes repairing the harm caused or revealed by criminal behavior.²⁸ While most approaches to juvenile justice concentrate on punishing or treating delinquent youth, the restorative justice process seeks to repair harm by involving the entire community in rehabilitating offenders and holding them accountable for their behavior.²⁹

Restorative justice is most effective when it uses cooperative processes that includes victims, offenders, and community members. The three principles that are the foundation of restorative justice are:

1. Justice requires that we work to restore those who have been injured.
2. Those most directly involved and affected by crime should have the opportunity to participate fully in the response if they wish.
3. Government’s role is to preserve a just public order, and the community’s is to build and maintain a just peace.³⁰

School Resource Officer (SRO)

School Resource Officers (SROs) are police officers and sheriff’s deputies assigned to work in elementary, middle, and high schools. They are specially chosen and trained to carry out multiple roles as they employ the “triad nature” of the SRO position—acting as counselors and mentors, educators, and law enforcement problem-solvers.³¹

Secret Service Safe School Initiative

The U.S. Secret Service Safe School Initiative is a 2002 study of school shootings and other school-based attacks that was conducted in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education. The study examined school shootings in the United States from 1974–2000, analyzing 37 incidents involving 41 student attackers through extensive review of police records, school records, court documents, and interviews with 10 school shooters. The goal was to identify information about a school shooting that may be identifiable or noticeable before the shooting occurs, to help inform efforts to prevent school-based attacks. One report outlines the study findings that some school attacks may be preventable, and that students can play an important role in prevention efforts.³² A second report outlines a process for conducting threat assessment in schools.

Truancy

While there is no nationally accepted definition of truancy, the following definition reflects many state policies: if a student is absent without an excuse from the parent/guardian or if the student leaves school or a class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge, it will be considered an unexcused absence and the student shall be considered truant.³³ Chronic truancy can lead to the involvement of juvenile or family courts.

Youth Courts

Youth courts, also known as “peer courts” or “teen courts,” provide opportunities for youthful offenders and their peers to learn about law proceedings and develop positive attitudes about civic engagement. With the consent of the justice system, youth court programs divert offenders from the juvenile justice system and offer youth a constructive way to take responsibility and hold themselves and their peers accountable. Through youth court programs, youth play the roles of prosecuting and defense attorneys, clerks, bailiffs, jurors, and judges to gain knowledge of the justice system. Youth courts can exact alternative sanctions for youthful offenders, such as mandating community service or restitution payments or requiring the offender to write an apology letter. Sanctions sometimes include requiring the offender to serve in the youth court program to hear other cases.³⁴



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