# Safe and Healthy

# K-12 Schools

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**Marge Easley,** LWVOR Action Committee Gun Violence Prevention Portfolio Holder
**Colt Gill**, Former Director, Oregon Department of Education
**Krista Parent,** Executive Director, Coalition of Oregon School Administrators

**The purpose of this report is to share research related to school safety which will inform League of Women Voters of Oregon positions that can be used to advocate for or against bills and policies proposed in the state. This is the second of three reports. The first concerned the education of exceptional K-12 learners. The third will concern career and technical education.**

## Executive Summary

Students need to feel that they are psychologically and physically safe in school in order to learn effectively. Psychological, or social/ emotional safety, is promoted through a supportive school community. Students feel a sense of belonging when they have positive relationships with their teachers and their peers. Strategies that promote social/emotional health and safety include standards created by the Oregon Department of Education.

Research has identified a number of organizational structures that enhance relationships in schools. In addition, physical structures of school buildings play a central role in promoting the health and safety of students. Oregon requires schools to provide reports of regular testing and mitigation for hazards such as asbestos, lead in water, and radon.

The report also looks at how gun violence in schools is a major concern in America. To address this, schools have relied on some physical structures, such as installing security devices, as well as organizational structures (policies and procedures) including arming school personal and training behavioral threat assessment teams.

All of the efforts to ensure the health and safety of students in schools depend on continuous sources of funding. The final section of the report looks at local, state, and federal funding sources.

## Introduction

Darling-Hammond et al. (2018)[1] wrote, "Students need a sense of physical and psychological safety for learning to occur, since fear and anxiety undermine cognitive capacity and short circuit the learning process." This report is addressing both psychological (social/emotional) safety and physical safety in schools.

Working with Darling-Hammond, DePaoli and McCombs (2023)[2] have found that school safety policies usually address building supportive school communities or increasing security.

This report is organized in four parts:

1) Building supportive school communities that promote social/emotional safety
2) Physical structures that support safe and healthy communities
3) Increasing school security to prevent gun violence
4) Funding of initiatives to ensure schools are safe and healthy

We are focusing on safety within the school building. The committee found limited research addressing safety for students outside the building at external school events.

## Building supportive school communities

We begin this discussion by focusing on social and emotional safety.

Psychological safety depends on a positive and inclusive atmosphere where pupils feel comfortable expressing themselves. They feel a sense of belonging - included in the school community where they experience positive relationships and emotional support.

In 2023, then Director of the Oregon Department of Education, Colt Gill wrote[3], "It is our responsibility to move beyond mere tolerance and inclusion toward respectful, affirming, and celebratory school communities where all students belong and succeed."

In their guiding principles for creating safe schools, the U.S. Department of Education[4] highlights the importance of supporting social and emotional needs of students by fostering a sense of belonging with a positive, safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment.

Inclusivity recognizes and values the individuality and diversity of all students, families, teachers and staff including those of different races, ethnicities, religions, genders, sexual orientation, and abilities.

Kreitman (2022)[5] observed, "Inclusion requires us to look at our schools, classrooms, and curriculum to understand how they play a role in creating a safe, inclusive environment for all children to participate and feel supported." Such recognition is related to the student's social and emotional development.

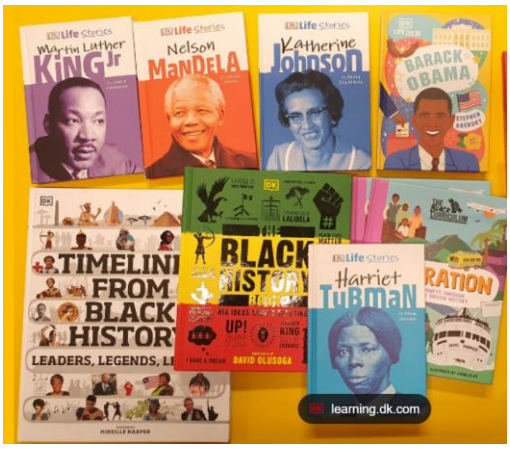
People feel a sense of belonging in schools that are inclusive and caring. Allen et al. (2021)[6] wrote that belonging is the essence of safe and welcoming when K-12 students feel they are in the right place, a safe place, valued for who they are with supportive relationships that foster the child's participation and give more worth to their learning experience.

This is particularly needed by students who have experienced traumatic events such as abuse, violence, natural disasters, terrorism, etc. Federal agencies have recommended strategies[7] designed to assist these students, including

- A designated space for de-escalation
- Stress balls
- Routine classroom schedules with movement breaks.

But ever since 1943, Maslow[8] and others have contended that belonging is a basic need for ALL students. School belonging is associated with many outcomes, including psychosocial health and wellbeing, prosocial behavior and academic achievement.

Unfortunately, the 2024-25 Student Educational Equity Development (SEED) Survey[9] of more than 180,000 students in Oregon – approximately a third of the 547,000 K-12 students - reported that most K-12 classroom materials do not reflect the diversity of our children. The report observed," Most 3rd-11th graders shared that they 'Never' or 'Rarely' saw people like them and their family in their class readings, materials, tests, and assignments (52-67%). High schoolers reported greater exposure to inclusive class materials than elementary and middle schoolers."



Resources describing Black experiences

Social and emotional safety are fostered by building strong connections between students, teachers, staff, and families to create a sense of belonging and support. The same SEED survey reported, “Most 3rd-11th graders liked school, felt welcome at school, and had positive relationships with peers and staff (61-95%). Elementary schoolers reported liking school more than middle and high schoolers.”

The US Department of Education (2023)[4] guidelines warn against harsh or unfair exclusionary discipline practices (e.g. suspension or expulsion), noting frequent disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline practices for children of color, LGBTQ students, and children with disabilities can contribute to students feeling unwelcome, unsafe, and unsupported. When this happens, schools miss crucial opportunities to support students’ needs and put students on the path toward success. Instead, schools should provide students with the social, emotional, physical, academic, and mental health support they need to thrive.

**Strategies for Promoting Social and Emotional Health**

DePaoli and McCombs (2023)[2] have found that the following strategies are effective at promoting social and emotional health:

- Mental health resources and supports
- Social and emotional learning and development standards
- Restorative practices
- Structures that enable positive developmental relationships

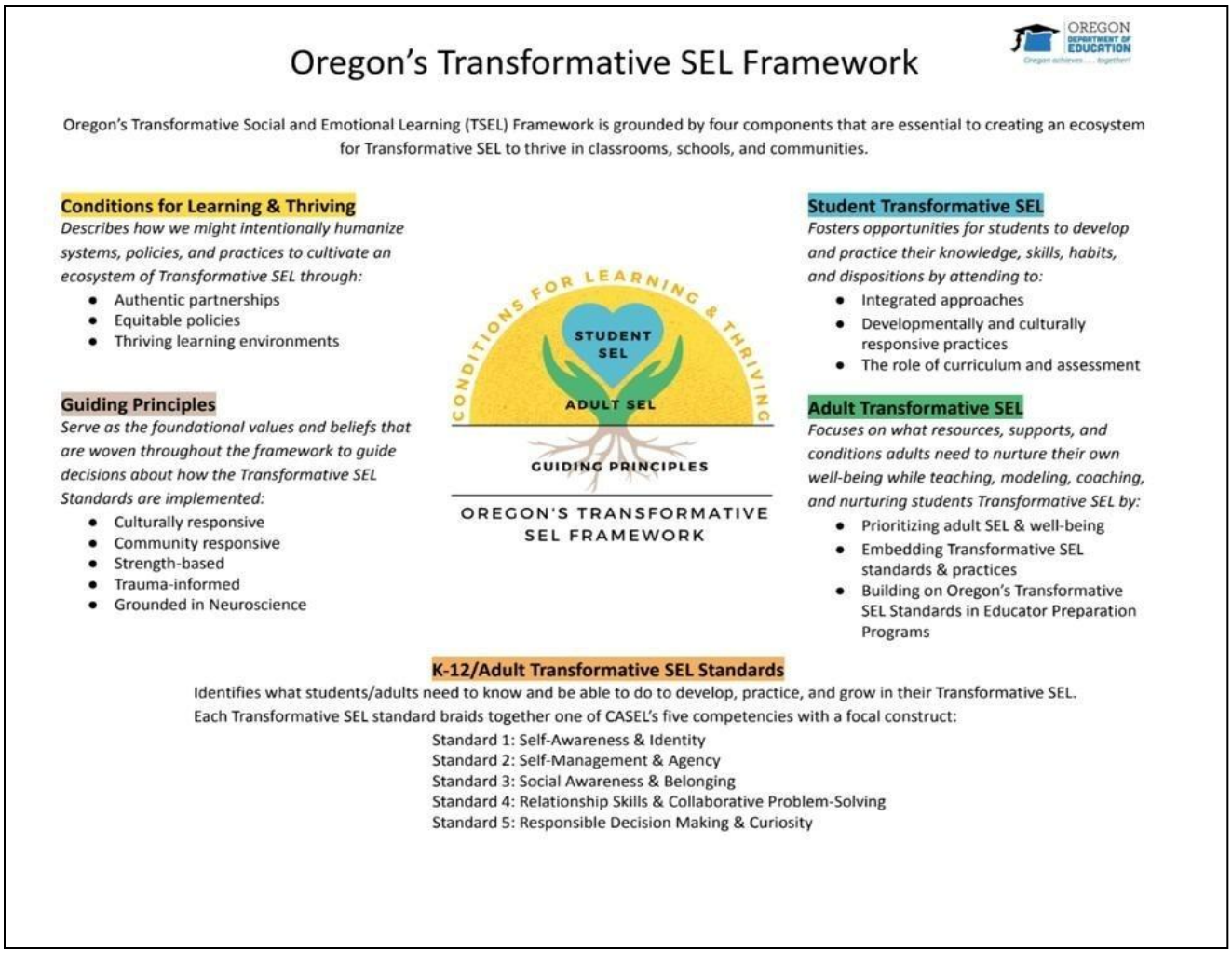
*Mental Health Resources and Supports*

In 2023, the CDC reported[10] that 40% of high school students had “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness”, 20% had seriously considered suicide, and 9% had actually attempted suicide. Further, females and LGBTQ+ students were more likely to exhibit these symptoms. The same report noted that the mental health of young people is supported when they feel connected by building strong bonds and relationships with adults and friends. School connectedness means that students believe that educators and peers in their school care not only about their education but also about themselves as people. They have a sense that they belong. Not only do students who are connected experience better overall mental health, but in addition, Wilkins et al. (2023)[11] found that that they demonstrated lower rates of lifetime marijuana use lifetime prescription opioid misuse, sexual intercourse, unprotected sex, rape, and absenteeism.

In Oregon, School-Based Health Centers (SBHC)[12] have been delivering physical, mental, and preventive services to students for 25 years. During the 2023-24 school year, Oregon's 87 SBHCs served 43,000 people –mostly school-aged youth ages 5 to 21 – and accommodated nearly 149,000 patient visits in 28 counties. That same year, SBHCs provided 51,427 behavioral health visits to 6475 school-aged clients. Unfortunately, in 2024-25, the state had only 1 school psychologist for every 1200 students – in stark contrast to the 1/500 ratio recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists.[13]

*Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards*

The Oregon Department of Education strives to promote psychological safety in schools with transformative social and emotional learning standards,[14] which went into effect in schools in 2024. The goal is to "help build capacity for strengthening school cultures that center equity, and support student and adult well-being through a systemic  approach ". Compliance is required by law.



The Transformative SEL standards are based on research summarized by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning[15] showing that SEL has a positive impact on academic achievement and student engagement. According to the Oregon Department of Education[14], "In order for SEL to be transformative, our policies, practices, and approaches will need intentional focus on how we create equitable learning environments that support students' personal and collective well-being. It entails more than following a curriculum or adding a program, but actually embedding SEL approaches into every content area and school interaction throughout the day.

This includes a shift in systems and a commitment to using:

● Integrated learning opportunities that are modeled, nurtured, and practiced in every context.

● Culturally responsive practices that affirm and honor students' ways of being, skill development in understanding cultural differences, and honoring students' unique strengths, perspectives, and contributions.

● Systemic approaches that consider the role and impact of the broader society and the learning environment on students' behavior and how this impacts the ways students view themselves.

● Social justice approaches that provide students with opportunities to reflect upon and understand the root cause of emotions related to our biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination.

● Student agency and voice (including non-verbal ways to communicate) that become valued and necessary parts of the educational process, supporting students to take actions that challenge and change systems."

One of the conditions for learning and thriving in the SEL transformative framework is equitable policies. This includes setting clear expectations by establishing clear rules of behavior which are consistently and fairly applied to address such problems as absenteeism, bullying, cyberbullying, violence, and mental and behavioral health issues.

While consistency is important, it is also important to remember that the framework requires equitable policies. Educators must take into account the need for appropriate consideration of establishing clear expectations with students having special needs. This ensures the fair administration of student discipline policies in ways that treat all students with dignity and respect through systemwide policy, staff development, and monitoring strategies.

Hurd et al. (2015)[16] found that students' perceptions of school disorder were related to feelings of reduced connectedness and predicted lower academic grades. However, if they experienced support from an adult in the school, these outcomes were lessened – particularly for boys.

According to Berger et al (2019)[17], even clear instructions for assignments did not lessen the impact of classroom disorder on student achievement in eighth grade mathematics.

While Oregon's SEL standards are laudable, it is too early to know how they are affecting functioning within school communities and learning. Further, it is worth noting that Oregon schools can use restraint and seclusion to control some students' behavior- particularly students with special needs.

Physical restraint is defined in Oregon statute[18] as "the restriction of a student's movement by one or more persons holding the student or providing physical pressure upon the student." Students have also been restrained chemically or mechanically. Seclusion is "the involuntary confinement of a student alone in a room from which the student is physically prevented from leaving."

Since 2012, Oregon has had a school safety law requiring training and planning before using either practice. Neither can happen for a long period of time, and neither is considered a standard disciplinary practice.

A memo prepared by the Legislative Policy and Research Office[19] reported that ODE documented in the 2023-24 school year at least 4,439 incidents of restraint and/or seclusion occurred in Oregon schools, with the vast majority of incidents involving restraint. Further, 12% of those incidents involved staff injuries, while 2% involved injuries to students.

Furthermore, 20 of the incidents, involving 16 program staff, were considered abusive. Finally, 7% of the incidents between 2019 and 2024 involved at least one untrained staff member.

*Restorative Practice / Restorative Justice*

Citing a definition by Hopkins (2003), the Oregon Department of Education[20] noted that restorative justice "puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over and above the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment. A restorative approach in a school shifts the emphasis from managing behavior to focusing on building, nurturing and repairing relationships."

The goal of restorative practices is to reduce suspensions and expulsions by teaching students to take control of their behaviors. They learn social-emotional skills as well as interventions for conflict resolution.

DePauli and McCombs (2023)[2] reported research showing not only that suspensions and expulsions are ineffective, but they harm academic achievement and tend to be used more with Black students and students with disabilities. In contrast, restorative practices are associated with better school climate, decreased student misbehavior and increased student achievement. DePaoli and McCombs did note that staff buy-in is important. They need to be willing to abandon traditional discipline techniques.

The Oregon Department of Education[20] reports that restorative practice have been effective in Phoenix High School in Southern Oregon, which reported zero expulsions and a higher graduation rate after three years of implementing restorative justice practices and peer mediation.

*Structures that support positive relationships*

In 2018, Darling Hammond and Cook-Harvey reported,[21] "Developing relationships can be difficult in schools where organizational structures minimize opportunities for personalized relationships that extend over time…Secondary teachers may see 150 to 200 students per day in short 45-minute blocks and, despite their best efforts, are unable to know all of their students or their families well. This reduces the extent to which teachers can build on personal knowledge in meeting students' needs".

DePaoli and McCombs[2] provide examples of research-based organizational structures which can enhance relationships within schools:

● Small learning communities are achieved by creating smaller units or teams in larger schools, which allow educators and students to know each other more fully, work more closely together, build community, and reduce the risk of students falling through the cracks.

Small learning communities may be created through advisory systems in which teachers regularly meet with a small group of students; advise, advocate, and support their academic, social, and emotional development; and build a small community of students to support one another. David (2008)[22] documented effects of small learning communities on student performance.

● Block scheduling has fewer class periods, with more time allotted per class each day. This decreases the number of students teachers see each day and allows more time for in-depth teaching and learning. In 2022, Morris[23] conducted a comprehensive review documenting the effects on achievement.

● Looping allows students to stay with the same teacher for more than 1 school year to deepen teacher knowledge of students and support consistent relationships with students and families. One example of how this practice affects student achievement was published by a senior policy analyst at the Rockefeller Institute of Government.[24]

● Reduced class sizes lower pupil load and give teachers greater capacity to know and understand their students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Smaller class sizes are associated with larger academic gains, particularly in elementary school. [25] The most accurate and recent class size numbers come from 2020-21 data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES),[26] The average class size in elementary public school departmentalized classes (specialized by subject matter) was 20.7 for the country and 29.1 for Oregon. For middle schools, the average departmentalized class size was 22 for the U.S. and 23 for Oregon. For departmentalized high school classes, the figures were 21 for the U.S. and 22.6 for Oregon.

In stark contrast, according to data released in 2025 by the Oregon Department of Education[27]. 25,500 classrooms in Oregon had 25 or more students. And close to 600 classes had

more than 56 students! While an outstanding teacher can lessen the Impact of class size, Oregon cannot rely on that.

**Oregon Department of Education Class Size Data from 2023-24**

| Subject Area | Median Class Size | Number of Classes of 15 or Fewer Students | Number of Classes of 16 to 25 Students | Number of Classes of 26 to 35 Students | Number of Classes of 36 to 45 Students | Number of Classes of 46 to 55 Students | Number of Classes of 56 or More Students | Total Students | Total Teachers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All Subjects/Grades | 22.5 | 17,172 | 32,600 | 22,920 | 1,593 | 393 | 594 | 523,982 | 24,360 |
| Total Self-Contained | 22.0 | 1,452 | 8,317 | 2,495 | 98 | 63 | 81 | 242,488 | 11,083 |
| Kindergarten | 20.0 | 242 | 1,452 | 138 | 10 | 1 | 2 | 33,010 | 1,698 |
| Grade 1 | 21.0 | 191 | 1,444 | 204 | 10 | 4 | 7 | 34,389 | 1,665 |
| Grade 2 | 22.0 | 123 | 1,353 | 318 | 6 | 17 | 2 | 35,907 | 1,650 |
| Grade 3 | 23.0 | 121 | 1,233 | 412 | 7 | 4 | 8 | 35,578 | 1,604 |
| Grade 4 | 24.0 | 105 | 1,056 | 550 | 9 | 6 | 3 | 36,124 | 1,567 |
| Grade 5 | 24.0 | 102 | 1,107 | 529 | 11 | 4 | 10 | 36,292 | 1,570 |
| Grade 6 | 23.0 | 55 | 196 | 85 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 6,707 | 291 |
| Grade 7 | 19.0 | 18 | 21 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 569 | 34 |
| Grade 8 | 17.0 | 18 | 17 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 520 | 30 |

.● Stronger school–family connections are created when time and supports are built in for teachers and administrators to maintain regular exchanges between home and school, plan teacher time for home visits, conduct positive phone calls home, and flexibly schedule school meetings and student-teacher-parent conferences around parents' availability.

Weiss et al (2010)[28] have documented ways in which schools that view parents as partners in education have increased achievement for students.

For instance, in community schools, families are seen as active partners in school improvement and student success. Thirteen districts in Oregon have community schools. These are defined as programs that foster citizen involvement and provide educational,

recreational, cultural and related services to the community.

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Family Resource Navigators[29] are available at Community Schools to work alongside families to help reduce barriers and stressors in the home, and promote self-sufficiency, so that students can learn and families can thrive.

Based on the research concerning structures that support positive relationships, DePaoli and McCombs[2] recommend the following policies:

- Increase student access to mental health and counseling resources,
- Invest in student support systems and community schools to connect students and families to needed supports.
- Adopt structures and practices that foster strong relationships.
- Invest in restorative practices and social and emotional learning.
- Prepare all school staff to better support student well-being.
- Collect data about student safety and well-being.
- Conduct equity reviews of school safety measures and their impact on discipline outcomes.

## Physical Structures that support safe and healthy communities

Do school facilities affect learning? The NetZED Laboratory from the University of Oregon School of Design published a white paper[30] from the California School Facilities Research Institute on "The Impact of School Facilities in Student Learning and Engagement" in 2021. Some of their findings include the following:

- Children prefer cooler interior environmental temperatures than adults.
- Thermal distraction, discomfort and physiological responses decrease student performance.
- Low ventilation rates hindered concentration and test performance standards.
- Access to daylight and windows positively affected student performance scores.
- Lighting produced non-visual effects associated with mood and behavior.
- Views of nature decreased student stress and increased student performance.
- Indoor plants have a positive impact on student attention and perceptions in the classroom and class.
- Children are a high-risk group for chronic noise exposure.

* Poor acoustics affect student learning and communication. High reverberation times and background noise decrease student performance.

The Environmental Protection Agency has reported[31] that health problems from environmental contaminants can take years to develop as the harmful substances accumulate in children's bodies. Long term health effects include risks of birth defects, cancer, asthma, brain damage, developmental delays, auditory and respiratory problems.

Environmental pediatricians have warned[32] of the effects of toxins found in school buildings. For instance:

- Lead found in paint, water pipes, and water coolers affects attention, intelligence, and behavior problems.
- Asbestos found in ceiling and floor tiles as well as dry wall in buildings constructed prior to 1980 is linked to cancer.
- Radon found in the air in rooms on and below ground level can cause lung cancer.
- Air pollution, stemming from poor cooling, heating, and ventilation, exacerbates asthma and allergies.

In a 2002 review of research, Earthman[33] concluded that students in old or substandard buildings scored 5 to 17 percentile points lower on tests of reading and math compared to students learning in modern or above-standard buildings, even when socioeconomic factors were controlled.

These facts are concerning because the average age of school buildings in Oregon is 56 years[34], according to the director of education facilities for the Oregon Department of Education. It should also be mentioned that many older school buildings west of the Cascades are vulnerable to earthquakes and would require extensive refitting to be safe.

**Healthy and Safe Schools Plans, Testing and Mitigation**

Environmental hazards at schools like lead in water and paint, radon, asbestos in construction, pest infestation, and subpar interior air quality are silent threats from within. Testing for environmental hazards identifies these risks. Compliance in testing is a way to identify and implement safe measures in schools

In 2017, the Oregon State Legislature passed SB 1062[35], which requires that every school district, education service district, and public charter school develop a Healthy and Safe Schools Plan (HASS Plan) addressing environmental hazards like lead (in water or paint, asbestos (all buildings built before 1980 commonly contain asbestos), radon, integrated pest management, and carbon monoxide. The intent of SB1062 was to provide a legislated requirement for safe and healthy environments in school facilities.

SB 1062 requires Oregon School Districts to file their initial HASS plans and then submit Annual Statements with test results by June 1st every year. HASS plans must be accessible on their District websites.

The K-12 School Safety Committee examined test results posted online for a random sample of 30 school districts out of the 197 in Oregon. We were interested in whether:

- Tests were reported on websites for lead in the water and for radon.
- Retests were reported when high levels of lead and radon were detected.
- If no retests were shared, then mitigation was described (e.g. removing or replacing drinking fountains.)

Unfortunately, only three of the 30 districts met those criteria. In some cases, districts reported their plans for testing and remediation but failed to share test results. One district asserted that they were in compliance but did not share test results to support their statement.

Some Districts did not provide a link to a HASS plan. Further examination of HASS plans found overdue testing dates, Safety Officer contacts who were no longer employed by the specific District, and unclear follow-up.

Mandated laws like HASS Plans provide a standardized framework for schools and districts. However, it is evident, even with mandates, that it is difficult to guarantee the safest, healthiest environments for students on a consistent basis.

Continued community involvement and attention to school facilities and funding may be the best action to provide healthy and safe schools for our Oregon students, teachers and staff.

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## Increasing school security to prevent gun violence

According to the Joint Task Force on School Safety and Justice[36], 2018 and 2023, In the United States, 117 students were killed in school shootings and 303 were wounded. In 2022, Lee et al.[37] observed, "Although school shootings are responsible for fewer than 1% of all firearm deaths in the United States, they receive a tremendous amount of attention."

Because of the disproportionate attention paid to gun violence in American schools, this part of the report focuses on measures being

implemented to deal with that potential threat. It is important to note DePaoli and McCombs[2] cautioned that research suggests using metal detectors, security cameras, reduced access, and school resource officers does not ensure school safety compared to building supportive school communities.

In 2023, television station KGW8 reported[38] 48 Oregon students were found in 13 districts with guns on school campuses. Oregon law requires that students be expelled for one year if they have brought a firearm to school.

Based on recommendations from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Oregon Revised Statute 336.071[39] and Oregon Administrative Rule 581-022- 2225[40] require schools to instruct and drill students on emergency procedures and maintain a comprehensive safety program that includes plans for responding to emergencies. According to the May 2025 Emergency Plans and Drills Guidance[41] all schools should have emergency plans for active shooters.

The preventative measures in the active shooter emergency plan emphasize intervention in problematic behaviors through 1) Behavior Safety Assessment teams and 2) reduced access to buildings as mechanisms to reduce incidences. In addition to these interventions a report from an advocacy organization, the Alliance for Safe Oregon,[42] calls for improved building security, reduced youth access to firearms to reduce gun violence in schools, and additional mental health supports,

**Physical Structures**

*Limiting Building Access*

According to the National Center for Education Statistics[43] 2021-22 school year survey, 97% of schools reported the use of locked doors to limit access to school buildings and 61% controlled access to school grounds. Little is known about the efficacy of this security mechanism. Further, Statista reports[44] that 42.7% of school shootings are committed by enrolled students who would have legal access to school grounds, making this security mechanism less effective.

*School Security Devices*

Security cameras are also used in most schools (97% of high schools, 91% of elementary).[43] However, Fisher et al. (2021)[45] determined in a national longitudinal study that cameras have not been found to prevent crimes in schools.

In 2021-22, 14% of high schools conducted random metal detector checks on students.[43] Considering the expense of installing and maintaining metal detectors, there is not a strong research base supporting their use. In 2017, Winn[46] reported that only 43% of metal weapons found in a New York school over a period of 3 months were identified with a metal detector.

Instead of a metal detector, the Salem-Keizer school district has installed a security system [47] similar to TSA equipment, which detects gun-shaped objects .

Security system in Salem-Keiser.

**Organizational Structures (Policies and Procedures)**

*Arming School Personnel*

According to the Pew Resarch Center[48], 65% of American schools reported having security staff present at least part time in 2015-16. School resource officers are trained law enforcement agents who contract to provide security for potentially multiple schools on a rotation to deter students from engaging in criminal activities.

While many districts have hired School Resource Officers (SRO), some districts arm their SROs. It is important to note that in some cases unarmed SROs may have a positive impact on school safety. For instance, in the Eugene district, SROs provide mentorship and assist in school-based investigations, such as assault and drug distribution. However, the focus of this report is whether it is advisable to have armed personnel in schools.

A study looking at every school shooting and attempted school shooting from 1980 to 2019 in US K–12 schools[49] found that the rate of death in incidents was 2.83 times greater in schools with armed guards on the scene than in those without. The deadliest school shootings in the last decade had armed guards present who did not prevent these tragedies. It is impossible for an armed guard to be in the right location at the right time to prevent a shooting. At best, they can minimize the death toll, if they can locate the shooter in time to take action. Of course, engaging in a shootout with the assailant can put additional bystanders at risk.

With an increased presence of armed law enforcement on campus, what used to be discipline issues handled by school teachers and administrators become crimes for which students are being arrested. According to Rand researchers[50], this contributes to the "school to prison pipeline" and results in policies that unfairly ensnare too many low socioeconomic and racial minority students.

Considering the cost and other concerns of employing SROs, some schools have turned to arming teachers. This can be an extremely dangerous policy and one that does not appear to have much popularity among school leaders. More than 2/3 of superintendents and more than 1/2 of principals surveyed expressed concerns about arming teachers in a 2026 study.[51] The same study reported that 16 states have policies forbidding arming teachers.

*Behavioral Threat Assessment Teams*

A survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (2024) [43] found that 85% of U.S. schools reported using behavioral threat assessment (BTA) teams. According to the United States Secret Service Threat Assessment Center[52] BTA is "a proactive approach

to identify, assess and provide appropriate interventions and resources for students who display a behavior that elicits concern for the safety of themselves or others".

Despite the apparent widespread use of BTA, the approach should be applied to schools with care and thought to the individuals being assessed. Young people frequently make threatening statements that are not serious and engage in aggressive behavior (Irwin et al., 2023).[53] Compared to adults, youth are more likely to engage in hitting, shoving, and fighting, but less likely to commit more serious acts of violence. It is important not to overreact to youthful misbehavior that does not pose a serious threat of violence. A study of Florida statewide trends in threat assessments reported that only 10% of BTA cases resulted in an attack and 0.4% resulted in serious injury (Kerere, et al. 2026)[54].

In 2025, results from a survey of American school leaders[55] revealed that Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management programs address the needs of individual students in a specific situation, with a focus on root causes of their behaviors as opposed to suspending or expelling them. Furthermore, 88% of the principals surveyed reported that BTA was effective at keeping their schools safe, and 70% thought it had improved the school climate.

A New York Police Department study (O'Neil et al. 2016)[56] of 50 years of school incidents reported a common thread of nearly 100% "leakage" in school shooting cases. According to Price and Khubchandani (2019)[57], "Leakage occurs when youths intentionally or unintentionally communicate, usually to peers or siblings, they are going to engage in a potentially violent act ." This suggests that an early alert, if acted on, could prevent the violent act from taking place. Multiple studies have identified potential school shootings that were prevented because students reported a threat to authorities that was investigated and determined to be serious.

Unfortunately, acting on leaked information is often delayed for a variety of reasons. A study of willingness to report school weapon-carrying by middle school youths found that 70% claimed they would report a student carrying a gun, but only 58% said that they would report the student if it were a friend (Brank et al. 2007[58]). According to the National Center for Education Statistics[43] 2021-22 school year survey, 62% of schools provided an anonymous reporting mechanism. A more recent survey of parents, students, and staff indicates that more than 70% of each group favored an anonymous reporting mechanism (Byrd et al. 2025)[59].

Concerns have also been raised by DePaoli and Loewe (2025)[60] that BTA could be influenced by implicit biases in the same way that Black students are suspended at a much higher rate than White students.

Oregon is committed to using BTA. The Oregon Department of Education reports[61] that, in the 2024-25 school year, 8118 people have been trained in Oregon's school safety prevention system, and 321 individuals have been

trained as school safety and prevention specialists.

Of course, BTA can help identify youth intent on harming themselves as well as others. Data collected in 2023[62] revealed that 61% of youth suicides in Oregon involved firearms. The Oregon Health Authority has published a Suicide Screening Brief for School Counselors[63], who should be an important part of a school's Behavioral Assessment Team. In addition, the SafeOregon school safety tip line[64] provides students and parents with an accessible tool they can use anonymously to report incidents of bullying, harassment, and other threats to student safety. Through June 2022, SafeOregon has received over 8,000 tips with more than 500 related to threats of school attacks or possession of weapons in school.

*Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPO)*

Implementation of Extreme Risk protection orders (ERPO) also known as "Red Flag Laws" while difficult to study, have shown some promising benefits. Oregon's ERPO law (ORS 166.525-166.543[65]) allows law enforcement to remove firearms temporarily from individuals at high risk of harming themselves or others.

While teachers cannot directly petition the court—only law enforcement and family/household members can—they frequently trigger this process by reporting threats to police. Between 2018 and 2023, 835 ERPO petitions were filed in Oregon[66], and about 11% of those were specifically linked to threats of mass violence, including school shootings.

One study of the law enacted in California in 2016 counted 21 cases of mass shootings prevented by such laws (Wintemute et al., 2019 [67]). These data are extremely difficult to analyze because of the nature of what is being studied - a lack of action. Oregon's extreme risk law strengthened by ballot measure 114 passed in November, 2022 allows law enforcement, family members and household members to petition for a court order to temporarily prevent someone in crisis from accessing guns.

*Active Shooter Drills*

Fire drills, a common practice in school safety plans, started in schools because of the Collinwood School fire disaster in 1908 which killed 175 people. Oregon schools also practice wildfire and earthquake drills. In addition, during the last decade over 90% of schools in the country have implemented some sort of active shooter or lockdown drill. (ElSherief et al., 2021)[68]

Active Shooter Drill picture

The National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and Everytown for Gun Safety all have recommended that schools stop using active shooter drills that are unannounced or simulate gun violence. A 2024 study[69] which Everytown for Gun Safety helped conduct found that "active

shooter drills in schools are associated with increases in depression (39%), stress and anxiety (42%), and physiological health problems (23%)". While current research is rife with reports of Increased stress, depression, and anxiety among students, parents and educators following school shooter drills, there have been some reported benefits such as the compliance with lockdown procedures. A 2024 study of Emergency Preparedness Drills (Schildkraut et al. 2024)[70] found that while lockdown procedures were uniformly effective, findings related to the effects of active shooter drills were variable. A middle ground between those concerned with anxiety created by these drills and the benefits to behaviors in emergent situations might be to focus drills on compliance with lock-down procedures but limit the roleplay that simulates active-shooter situations.

*Reduced Access to firearms*

A study performed by the New York Police department detailing 84 shootings in schools from 1966 to 2016 reported that 65% of shooters were under the age of 21, the youngest being just 11 years old (O'Neill et al. 2016)[56]. It would stand to reason that preventing minors from obtaining a firearm in the first place may prove significantly impactful to this statistic. According to a 2018 study by Alathari et al.[71] 76% of firearms used in school-related attacks between 2008 and 2017 were acquired from the home of a friend or family member where the minor knew how to access it either because it was unlocked (48% of cases) or the student knew the combination to the locker (16% of cases).

The laws that appear to be most impactful on reducing gun violence in minors are Child Access Prevention (CAP) laws. CAP laws hold gun-owning adults accountable for allowing children access to firearms. In a well-publicized case[72] in 2015. a judge sentenced Michigan parents to 10-15 years for involuntary manslaughter after their son killed other students in his school.

A study of FBI Homicide reports from 1985-2013 found a 17% reduction in firearm-related homicides committed by young people in states with strict CAP laws (Anderson et al.2021)[73] Compared to States with no CAP laws, states with CAP laws are associated with an 18% decrease in the rate at which students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (Anderson and Sabia, 2025)[74].

Grossman[75] demonstrated that safe storage practices, including keeping firearms stored unloaded, in a locked place, separate from ammunition, and/or secured with an extrinsic safety device, were shown to be protective for unintentional firearm shootings and suicide attempts among adolescents and children.

Research at Johns Hopkins[76] revealed that in 2025 twenty seven states had CAP laws, including Oregon. Oregon's safe storage law requires securing a firearm:

* With an engaged trigger/cable lock;
* In a locked container; or
* In a gun room.

*Legislation Regarding Safe Schools*

The Every Student Succeeds Act Includes an "Unsafe School Choice Option" (20 U.S.C. 7912[77]) which permits a student who is attending a "persistently dangerous school" to transfer to a safer school.

In Oregon, a school would qualify as persistently dangerous if, for each of three years, it had expelled more than a defined proportion of its students for possessing a firearm or dangerous weapon, or for committing a violent crime. If a school were placed on a watch list for exceeding the number of expulsions for one year, it would work with the Oregon Department of Education Office of Enhancing Student Opportunities to create and implement a plan to ensure the safety of the students. If the school remained on the watch list, it would be required to revise the plan in subsequent years.

In 1998, two students were killed and 25 wounded when a student opened fire in a school in Springfield, Oregon. In response, the Oregon legislature passed legislation in 2001 mandating the expulsion of any student who brought a weapon or anything resembling a weapon to school (e.g. even a toy gun).

As noted previously, expulsion and suspension are classified as "exclusionary" discipline tactics, and research[78] has uncovered serious concerns regarding the academic and social impact of exclusionary school discipline practices on students. So in 2013 the Oregon legislature passed HB 2192[79] requiring school administrators to consider a student's age, past behavior, and the circumstances of the discipline incident before using exclusionary practices.

Between 2009-10 and 2024-25, Oregon did not identify any schools meeting the criteria to be on a watch list, so Oregon did not identify any schools as persistently dangerous.

# Funding

## Local

Oregon has two options for voter-approved property taxes to provide supplemental funding that exceeds state funding levels for their local schools. Bond levies are long-term loans to fund large capital projects such as new buildings and infrastructure improvements such as mitigation of health hazards.

Local option levies may be authorized for up to five years and may be used to provide supplemental funding for school operations including smaller class size, staff retention, and support for other programs that enhance educational offerings.

One of the consequences of such local funding is a disparity between districts based on their ability to get voter approval for such funding. Not all districts have voters willing to support local measures, and not all have the staff to apply for grants.

## State

In 2024, when the Transformative and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

standards went into effect, SB 5701[80] allocated funding during the 2024-25 school year for:

- Professional development for educators to implement the standards effectively.
- Supplemental instructional materials aligned with the framework.
- Support for schoolwide and community-wide SEL integration across K–12.

In addition, the state has offered SEL-related grants[81] For instance, in 2023, $8 million total funding was available to public school districts committed to developing and scaling SEL programs.

The State of Oregon has offered various grants to assist schools in environmental testing and mitigation. The Oregon Department of Education Technical Assistance Program[82] provides grants for radon testing as well as asbestos management and mitigation.

Further, public K-12 school districts in Oregon can apply for a Seismic Rehabilitation Grant Program.[83] Of districtcourse, not all districts have the staff available to apply for grants.

State funding was also available in 2024-25 for districts to purchase wireless panic alarms allowing staff to notify emergency responders about threats.[84]

**Federal**

Below is a table displaying funding which has been available through the federal government. Some of these come from the Department of Education, so that funding is uncertain currently. Two of those programs have already ended (Stronger Connections Grants and IDEA American Rescue Plan).

| **Examples of funding for school safety that has been available from the federal government** | |
|---|---|
| **Title of Program** | **Examples of funding available** |
| Stronger Connections Grants[85](2023) U.S. Department of Education | Creating positive, inclusive, and supportive school environments |
| | Mental Health Services |
| Title 1 funds[86] for schools with at least 40% students from low income families: Schoolwide Program U.S. Department of Education | Following a needs assessment, schools must develop a schoolwide plan that includes school safety. |

| | |
|---|---|
| IDEA [87] (2021)<br>U.S. Department of Education | Technology that enhances emergency preparedness and response for students with disabilities. |
| Every Student Succeeds Act [88]<br>U.S. Department of Education | Suicide prevention, Trauma-informed practices in classroom management, Crisis management and conflict resolution, Human traffickin, School-based violence prevention strategies, Drug abuse prevention, Bullying and harassment prevention, Child sexual abuse awareness and prevention, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports |
| FEMA Nonprofit Security Grant Program [89]<br><br>Or State Homeland Security Grant Program | Enhance the physical security of nonprofit organizations at high risk of terrorist attacks or extremist violence. |
| Office of Justice and Juvenile Delinquency Prevention – Enhancing School Capacity to Address Youth Violence [90] (2024) | supports targeted, evidence-based prevention and intervention programs to address youth violence in schools. The program's goals are to reduce the incidence of school violence through improved school safety and climate and to prevent youth violence, delinquency, and victimization in the targeted community. |
| Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) School Violence Prevention Program [91] (2025)<br>U.S. Department of Justice | Funding given to law enforcement working with schools |
| | Metal detectors, locks, etc. |
| | Technology to contact law enforcement |
| Bureau of Justice Assistance Stop School Violence [92] (2023)<br>U.S. Department of Justice | Training for behavioral threat assessments |
| | Trauma-informed resources for students in mental health crisis |
| | Technological solutions such as anonymous reporting |

Unfortunately, there are concerns about the sustainability of federal funding and inequities in the ability of the state and local communities to provide sufficient financial support.

## Conclusion

In order for schools to provide safe and healthy communities for learning, educators and policymakers need to consider structures that facilitate both psychological (social/emotional) and physical safety. This report has shared recommendations from research as well as information about how effectively Oregon's schools seem to be meeting the challenges.

Oregon has implemented some valuable practices designed to enhance psychological health and safety, including:

- School-based health centers
- Transformative social and emotional learning standards
- Community schools

Regarding physical safety, Oregon requires that Healthy and Safe Schools Plans and reports be accessible on district websites.

Concerning policies designed to prevent school violence, Oregon requires schools to:

- Instruct and drill students on emergency procedures
- Create emergency plans for active shooters including behavior threat assessment teams and reduced access to buildings.

An examination of funding sources revealed that it has been possible for school districts to obtain money from local, state, and federal sources.

There appears to be room for growth in Oregon in all of these areas.

## Research-Informed Policy Recommendations

We recommend that readers who would like more information on safe school policies recommended by educational research consult the following resources:


Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. What Does the Research Say? https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-does-the-research-say/

Darling-Hammond, L. and Cook-Harvey, C.M. (2018) Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/547/download?inline&file=Educating_Whole_Child_REPORT.pdf

DePaoli, J. and McCombs, J. (2023). Safe Schools, Thriving Students: What We Know About Creating Safe and Supportive Schools. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/safe-schools-thriving-students-report

Oregon Department of Education (2023). Supporting Gender Expansive Students: Guidance for Schools. https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/equity/civilrights/Documents/ODE-Supporting-Gender-Expansive-Students.pdf

U.S. Department of Education (2023) Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates. https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf

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