MAKING SAFETY SACRED

A MESSAGING TOOLKIT FOR POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

Safety is a core value we all share. Families of all races, income levels, cultural backgrounds and zip codes want to live in a safe environment where they have the opportunity to pursue happiness and enjoy loved ones around them. When we send our children to school, we want to watch them blossom into their full potential, not experience the emotional stress of fearing for their safety daily.

Yet, that's precisely what so many youth experience when they attend schools where the presence of police makes them feel targeted and under constant surveillance. Black, Brown and Indigenous youth consistently describe feeling at risk when police officers patrol their schools because of the ways youth of color are targeted and funneled into the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline. Policies that double down on police in schools are often justified by the rationale that they will help curb school mass shootings. However, research consistently proves having armed law enforcement on school grounds does not stop mass shootings. Instead, evidence shows the presence of police in schools increases chronic absenteeism, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions and arrest of young people, which we know are all contributing factors to the school-to-prison pipeline. Such negative impacts are more likely to affect students of color and students with disabilities.

As the youth justice movement joins forces to push back on increased police presence in schools, we have a critical opportunity to advance the holistic vision of physical, mental and emotional safety as sacred for all children. Police officers in schools simply don't make our children safer.

In the following toolkit, we present a VPSA (Values, Problem, Solution, Action) messaging framework for youth justice advocates to elevate the value of sacred safety for all. Further, we provide talking points supporting police-free schools and responses to the opposition.
FRAMING SAFETY AS SACRED FOR ALL YOUTH:
Values, Problem, Solution, Action (VPSA) Message Building

Values
Why should the audience we are talking to care about our message? What are
the values we share with them?

Key Value: Safety.
Schools are sacred spaces where we trust that our children will be safe from
physical, mental and emotional harm.

Problem
How does the problem we are speaking out about violate a shared societal
value?

Having police in schools violates society’s shared value of safety for all youth.
Proponents posit police in schools as an answer to keeping youth safe from mass
shootings. Evidence repeatedly shows that this isn’t true – police have no impact
on stopping mass shootings from occurring. Research has shown that police in
schools harm young people’s mental, emotional and physical safety – especially
Black, Brown and Indigenous youth. Police presence in schools significantly
contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. It changes the school environment
by increasing chronic absenteeism, in-school suspensions, out-of-school
suspensions, expulsions, and police referral and arrest – all of which negatively
affect young people’s emotional and mental health. Further, increased contact
with law enforcement and the legal system increase risk for physical harm at the
hands of police or within correctional facilities.

Solution
Positive, Systems-focused Solution; See What Works Section of Talking Points for
More

We must invest in our children’s holistic safety in schools, including their physical,
emotional and mental protection. This includes:
• Accountability for schools to maintain safe physical and mental health environments that "protect all students and adults from bullying, discrimination, harassment, and assault." (Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, 2022)
• School counselors and coordinated community and school mental health ecosystem
• Discipline policies that increase connectedness within the school environment and prioritize restorative justice and accountability - not isolate students for days or weeks, furthering their sense of disconnectedness.

For more, see comprehensive safety recommendations provided by the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, May 27, 2022.

**Action**

*What are we asking people to do?*

• For Policymakers - Shift investments from policing infrastructures to fund proven solutions that increase school safety, like positive behavioral interventions, restorative justice, and more school counselors.

• Students/Parents - Leverage your power as consumers of our education system. Demand school boards and city councils listen to your voices and stop increasing investments in school police.

• School Staff/Administrators – School officials are the key to creating safe schools by setting the school climate and encouraging student connectedness. Heed the research and invest in proven solutions that enhance school climates, such as positive behavioral interventions and restorative justice.

"Safety is more than physical safety; it includes emotional safety, psychological safety, and identity safety, and involves effects over a child's life course."
- Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, May 27, 2022
TALKING POINTS IN SUPPORT OF POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS


- The fact that youth of color are more likely to deal with school police and the harmful consequences of their presence necessitates that their voices be the center of any conversations about how jurisdictions are using law enforcement on school grounds. School Resource Officers (SROs) are disproportionately concentrated in schools with a high proportion of Black and Latinx students. Black and Latinx students are also disproportionately arrested on these school campuses. Source: Health and Cultural Wealth: Student Perspectives on Police-Free Schools in Southern California

- Students of color have clearly stated that police in schools make them feel unsafe and like criminals. See:
  - U.S. students of color push back on calls for police in schools
  - Some students of color fear more police in schools following the Uvalde shooting
  - Opinion: We are terrified police in our schools will harm us
  - A push to hire school safety officers awakens an old debate

Key Quote:

"Every day, I walk into school greeted with silencing stares from armed police officers. They’re not facing the windows or the doors looking out for a stranger who could walk in and hurt my friends and me. Their eyes are on us, not some external threat. We walk past them silently, afraid that anything we do or say will be perceived as a 'threat' that will lead to suspension, arrest or worse, physical harm."

Source: "We Are Terrified Police in Our Schools Will Harm Us," by Jasiah Villalta. JJIE, April 12, 2021.
2. There’s No Evidence that Law Enforcement in Schools Reduces Mass Shooting or Gun Violence.

- Placing police in schools has gone hand in hand with school desegregation. Begun at least as early as 1948, with the formation of the Los Angeles School Police Department, school-based police increased following the Brown v. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court decision desegregating schools. Source: Replacing School Police with Services that Work, Bazelon Center, August 2021

- The expansion and large investments in school police officers came after the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School. While the purported purpose of expanding police in schools has been stated to prevent mass shootings, a study by the University of Albany, SUNY and RAND Corporation analyzing a national dataset found no evidence to suggest school police officers effectively reduce incidences of mass shootings. Source: The Thin Blue Line in Schools: New Evidence on School-Based Policing Across the U.S., The University at Albany, SUNY/RAND Corporation, 2021.

- "A recent study of every intentional school shooting from 1980 to 2019 found that there was no relationship between having an armed officer on the school grounds and the rate of injuries. Furthermore, after controlling for the school region, type, grade level, location, use of lockdown drills, number of and type of weapons and shooters, there were nearly 3 times as many casualties in incidents with armed officers present. The authors concluded that 'an armed officer on the scene was the number one factor associated with increased casualties.' Source: "More Guns in Schools is Not the Answer to School Shootings," Forbes, June 2, 2022.

- Police presence in schools does, however, significantly change the school environment, according to the SUNY/RAND study, by increasing chronic absenteeism, increasing in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and police referral and arrest – which we know are all contributing factors to the school to prison pipeline. Source: The Thin Blue Line in Schools: New Evidence on School-Based Policing Across the U.S., The University at Albany, SUNY/RAND Corporation, 2021.
Not surprisingly, the SUNY/RAND study found the negative impact of increased police presence was far greater on Black students and students with disabilities. The increased use of punishment as a result of increased police presence was over 2X larger for Black students than white students, and significantly larger for students with disabilities than students without disabilities. *Source: The Thin Blue Line in Schools: New Evidence on School-Based Policing Across the U.S., The University at Albany, SUNY/RAND Corporation, 2021.*

For further data on the disproportionate impact on students with disabilities, see: *Replacing School Police with Services that Work, Bazelon Center, August 2021.*

**Framing: Who Defines Safety?**

- The data don't show a connection between increasing law enforcement in schools and stopping or preventing mass shootings. The data do bear out the harms to youth in schools, such as increasing the school-to-prison pipeline. Why are we advancing a policy that doesn't work for its stated purpose AND creates serious harm?

- Youth of color and youth with disabilities are the most harmed by increased investments in police in schools. Yet, these students are consistently left out of the policy conversation when decisions about police in schools are made. Shouldn't those most likely to be harmed by increased law enforcement in schools have a say?
3. Law Enforcement in Schools Fuels the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

- School police officers often send young people straight to the justice system — frequently for behavior that can and should be handled in the school. That has long-term impacts and often keeps youth from obtaining jobs or further education. Source: *Education Under Arrest: The Case Against Police in Schools*, Justice Policy Institute, 2011.

- "Evidence shows that the presence of SROs can mean increased rates of arrests of students for minor offenses, such as disorderly conduct or simple assault, resulting in greater numbers of children than necessary being exposed to the justice system." Source: *Research on the Impact of School Policing*, ACLU of PA, April 2022.

- "Research also shows that schools with SROs tend to have higher rates of exclusionary school discipline than do other, comparable, schools. . . . even when SROs are not directly involved in school discipline, their presence can shift schools' practices in subtle ways that make exclusionary discipline more likely." Source: *Research on the Impact of School Policing*, ACLU of PA, April 2022.

- "Importantly, youth of color are considerably more likely than white youth to experience these harms. A large volume of research demonstrates consistently that youth of color are at significantly greater risk of exclusionary punishment, and that this discrepancy is not accounted for by different rates of student misbehavior. Youth of color are also more likely to be arrested at school and suffer the consequences of an arrest record." Source: *Research on the Impact of School Policing*, ACLU of PA, April 2022.

- "SROs' view of their mission is infected by bias. A survey of SROs found that in mostly white, affluent school districts, SROs viewed their role as protecting the school from outside threats. In schools with a substantial number of Black and Latinx students, SROs viewed their role as protecting against the students themselves." Source: *Replacing School Police with Services that Work*, Bazelon Center, August 2021.
4. There Are Better Ways To Improve School Safety And Reduce Child Victimization.

- The recipe for every school will be different. Still, specific programs may include Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), restorative justice, trauma-informed schools, student conflict resolution programs, mentoring, cognitive behavioral therapy, Multisystemic Family Therapy (MST), Functional Family Therapy (FFT), and similar therapeutic programs. See: Whole Child Policy Toolkit, Learning Policy Institute, May 2022.

- "On average, schools implementing PBIS experience 20- to 60-percent reductions in disciplinary incidents and also reduced racial and ethnic disparities in discipline." Source: Replacing School Police with Services that Work, Bazelon Center, August 2021.

- "Studies indicate that implementing schemes of restorative justice in schools reduces the use of discipline and racial inequities in discipline. It also appears to reduce disparities between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. . . . Expulsions and dropouts were reduced by 70 percent after the Denver Public School System (DPS) implemented a Restorative Justice model." Source: Replacing School Police with Services that Work, Bazelon Center, August 2021.

- "Increasingly, it is understood that experiences of trauma affect and underlie much student behavior. Behaviors perceived as "defiance" or "disruptive" can be responses to past trauma. . . . Trauma-informed schools are guided by a multidisciplinary team of trauma-informed staff, provide a range of trauma-informed support, and use a structured process for implementation and evaluation." Source: Replacing School Police with Services that Work, Bazelon Center, August 2021.

- It is critical to increase mental health resources and supports in schools, to provide direct support to students and support to staff in addressing behavior issues. Yet 90 % of students attend public schools that don't meet the recommended standards for mental health support staff and over fourteen million students attend schools with police, but no social worker, psychologist, or counselor. Source: Replacing School Police with Services that Work, Bazelon Center, August 2021.
• "Several meta-analyses have demonstrated effectiveness of universal and targeted school violence prevention programs, when well implemented." Source: Overview of School Violence Prevention Fact Sheet #1, Consortium to Prevent School Violence, March 2008.

• "Early intervention programs that ameliorate emerging problems in the academic and social-emotional-behavioral domains can greatly help to reduce future problem behaviors." Source: Overview of School Violence Prevention Fact Sheet #1, Consortium to Prevent School Violence, March 2008.

• A growing body of research shows that states that have limited access to assault weapons and high-capacity magazines experience far fewer mass shootings and far fewer injuries and deaths. Source: "More Guns In Schools Is Not The Answer To School Shootings," Forbes, June 2, 2022.

• These kinds of approaches are good for keeping everyone safe; and they also help every child by reducing violence and problem behavior in schools, and helping schools do what they're supposed to: help children learn.
They say: "Arming staff/more SROs will cause people to think twice before carrying out a violent attack."

Response: This idea might sound good as a cable news sound bite, but the research simply doesn't show armed staff or police on school grounds effectively deter school shootings. When examining 133 cases of school shootings between 1980 and 2019, a 2021 Jama Network study found no association between having an armed officer on school grounds and violence deterrence. In fact, armed officers were found to be the "number one factor associated with increased casualties after the perpetrators' use of assault rifles or submachine guns." According to the study's authors, this is attributed to the "well-documented weapons effect" where the "presence of a weapon increases aggression."

"Prior research suggests that many school shooters are actively suicidal, intending to die in the act, so an armed officer may be an incentive rather than a deterrent. The majority of shooters who target schools are students of the school, calling into question the effectiveness of hardened security and active shooter drills. Instead, schools must invest in resources to prevent shootings before they occur."

They say: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

Response: The time to intervene and stop a mass shooter from reaching the point of no return is before they get to the active shooting stage. By the time someone gets to a school grounds to carry out a shooting, they have already prepared to be caught or killed. That, in many ways, is what they are looking for. A "good guy with a gun" will not stop their actions. According to the Violence Project, 87 % of school mass shooters were in a crisis prior to the shooting, with 78 % being suicidal prior to the shooting. The rate of deaths is 2.83 times greater with an armed officer present. Source: The Violence Project, School Mass Shootings Infographic

A researcher who studies mass shootings explains why an armed security guard would likely not deter a school shooter," Jill Peterson, Co-Founder of The Violence Project on The Lead with Jake Tapper, CNN.com. May 31, 2022.

They say: "Arming staff is the solution."

Response: If the presence of an armed law enforcement officer actually increases rates of death (See: The Violence Project), what do we think arming staff would do? We've spent years trying to keep kids in school, and guns out of school. Why bring more into the classroom? We don't need our kids thinking that their teachers are armed – that sends the wrong message. Additionally, teachers overwhelmingly oppose the idea of arming staff. We should listen to the group that would be responsible for implementing such a drastic policy. Source: "Most U.S. Teachers Oppose Carrying Guns in Schools," by Megan Brenan. Gallup Poll, March 16, 2018.
The National Juvenile Justice Network leads a membership community of 60 state-based organizations and numerous individuals across 42 states and D.C. We all seek to shrink our youth justice systems and transform the remainder into systems that treat youth and families with dignity and humanity. Our work is premised on the fundamental understanding that our youth justice systems are inextricably bound with the systemic and structural racism that defines our society; as such we seek to change policy and practice through an anti-racist lens by building power with those who are most negatively affected by our justice systems, including young people, their families and all people of color. We also recognize that other vulnerable populations - including LGBTQIA+, those with disabilities and mental illness, girls and immigrants - are disparately and negatively impacted by our justice systems, and thus we also seek to center their concerns in our policy change work.