

ISSUE BRIEF

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Existing Programs and Practices in State and Federal Efforts to Maintain School Safety

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The tragic shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, has brought a renewed focus on federal, state, and local policies pertaining to school safety. This *Issue Brief* reviews general state practices to maintain safe schools and federal education programs that fund and shape some local school practices. Re-examining how school safety initiatives are implemented in states suggests the need for increased collaboration among states and new flexibility for states when it comes to the use of existing federal funds.

School Safety Problems Faced by State and Local Education Agencies

States play a role in ensuring school safety, managing resources, and providing training, technical assistance, and guidance to local schools. As both the National Governors Association and the Department of Justice (DOJ) have found, “[S]chool safety responsibility typically rests with the SEA [state education agency].”¹ State School Safety Centers (SSSCs) often manage those efforts, and exist in 48 out of 50 states and the District of Columbia, with some states operating multiple SSSCs.² According to the DOJ, 36 out of 56 SSSCs are located within state education agencies (SEAs),

while the remainder are found in other state agencies and organizations, such as emergency management offices and universities. Other states that do not operate SSSCs situate individuals tasked with designing and overseeing school safety policies in state agencies (such as departments of education or public safety agencies).

As the DOJ notes, SSSCs undertake a wide range of priorities, influenced by various factors such as whether there have been “high profile incidents of violence, such as school shootings,” the agency in which the center is housed, the number of staff, and the years the center has been in operation.³ As a result, SSSC responsibilities vary considerably from state to state.⁴ Because SSSCs work closely with SEAs, local education agencies (LEAs), and schools, “they play a key role in working with federal and state governments as well as LEAs and schools in shaping, informing, and implementing legislation, policies, practices, and programming to improve school safety.”⁵ SSSCs perform the following services:

- Conduct research and evaluations;
- Share best practices with nearby states;
- Work with local law enforcement;
- Respond to school safety incidents;
- Provide feedback on policy proposals;
- Train school resource officers;

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- Develop emergency operations plans;
- Undertake threat assessments; and
- Help schools prepare for crises, including school shootings.⁶

Notably, at a 2016 roundtable of SSSC representatives convened by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), stakeholders discussed the role they play—and challenges associated with—training school resource officers (SROs) and associated school personnel:

When schools are first assigned an SRO, school administrators may not understand what the SRO’s job should entail. To address this, some SSSCs provide legal education training to school administrators or meet with administrators to discuss the SROs’ activities, their legal responsibilities, and the limits of their tasks at school. Some SSSCs collect data on school-based arrests initiated by SROs to inform stakeholders about school discipline practices.⁷

Although SSSCs have much of the needed contextual knowledge to navigate school safety issues within their jurisdiction, SSSC representatives have identified persistent areas of concern, such as when:

- Multiple agencies are involved,
- Issues come with differing opinions about the best path forward,
- Federal privacy laws prevent schools from sharing the results of threat assessments,

- Federal agencies supply conflicting guidance to states, and
- SSSC efforts to share school safety efforts with other states encounter difficulties.

Several concerns from state school safety representatives could inform current school safety efforts among state and federal policymakers. Participants in the NIJ’s 2016 forum reported that school principals “frequently work alone to assess safety concerns and risks inside their schools.”⁸ To mitigate that issue, SSSC representatives discussed the need to build relationships in order to share information and learn about best practices in school safety from other states. Some SSSCs, for example, engage in a monthly conference call to share information on school safety efforts. SSSC representatives suggested developing a framework for collecting school safety data with “consistent and clearly defined terminology and guidance about information sharing.”⁹ In addition to how principals too often work in isolation on school safety practices, SSSC representatives were “frustrated about the tendency for legislators and policymakers to act precipitously following a school safety incident,” reducing their capacity to pursue “strategic, sustained, and comprehensive school safety approaches.”¹⁰ Finally, SSSC representatives underscored the need for local leaders to be empowered to develop approaches to preventing school violence.

U.S. Department of Education Programs Pertaining to School Safety

States and local school districts are on the front lines of providing school safety. However, several federal Department of Education programs provide

1. Mary Poulin Carlton, Phelan Wyrick, Nadine Frederique, and Basia Lopez, “States’ Roles in Keeping Schools Safe: Opportunities and Challenges for State School Safety Centers and Other Actors,” National Institute of Justice *Report* (NCJ250608), July 2017, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED575990.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2018).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

additional funding sources supplementing state and local programs. The U.S. Department of Education funds school safety and mental health activities primarily through Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), most recently authorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), through two overarching programs:

1. The Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) Program; and
2. National School Safety Activities (which is comprised of several smaller programs).

Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program. Part A of Title IV of the ESEA authorizes Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants. Although the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program is not specifically designated for school safety or mental health purposes, districts can use the funding for bullying prevention or to provide mental health assistance. For example, states and LEAs may use the grants to develop “relationship building skills to help improve safety through the recognition and prevention of coercion, violence, or abuse.”¹¹ The SSAE grants can also be used for bolstering foreign language instruction, building technological infrastructure, and a host of other services that are unrelated to school safety. These programs/purposes were all consolidated under Title IV, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act when the ESEA was reauthorized in 2015. SSAE grants were funding at \$400 million in fiscal year (FY) 2017.¹²

National School Safety Activities. Several discretionary grant programs are authorized under

Part F of Title IV of the ESEA and comprise the law’s National School Safety Activities.

- **Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV).** Project SERV provides federal funding in the aftermath of violent or traumatic school-based events to aid schools in recovery. Project SERV provides both short-term and long-term education-related services in affected schools, including both through local education agencies and institutions of higher education.¹³ For example, the Texas Education Agency received a Project SERV grant in early 2018 to help local school districts in the Presidential Disaster Declaration impacted by Hurricane Harvey.¹⁴ The Newtown, Connecticut, Public School District restrict received a total of \$6.4 million in Project SERV grants between the 2012–2013 school year and the 2014–2015 school year in the wake of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.¹⁵ Project SERV was funded at \$1 million in FY 2017, in addition to the \$5.2 million balance that remains from prior years.
- **Full-Service Community Schools Program (Community Support for School Success Program).** The Full-Service Community Schools Program provides federal funding for projects that “involve a school as the locus for the provision of comprehensive academic, social, and health services that respond to the needs of students, their families, and community members.”¹⁶ Funding is also available to support school mental health services. In addition to youth crime prevention and rehabilitation services, the grants

11. U.S. Department of Education, “Non-Regulatory Guidance Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants,” October 2016, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essassaegrantguid10212016.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2018).

12. U.S. Department of Education, “Provisions in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2017 that Relate to the Title IV, Part A Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant Program,” https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/ProvisionsConsolidatedAppropriationsAct2017_Title%20IVASSAE.pdf (accessed March 12, 2018).

13. U.S. Department of Education, “Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV),” <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/dvppserv/index.html> (accessed March 12, 2018).

14. News bulletin, “2017-18 Project SERV Hurricane Recovery Grant Now Available,” Texas Education Agency, January 9, 2018, <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/TXTEA/bulletins/1d1dcba> (accessed March 13, 2018).

15. News Release, “U.S. Department of Education Awards More Than \$6.4 Million in Grants to Connecticut’s Newtown Public School District to Further Support Recovery,” U.S. Department of Education, September 3, 2014, <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-awards-more-64-million-grants-connecticut%E2%80%99s-newtown-public-school-district-further-support-recovery-efforts> (accessed March 12, 2018).

16. Ibid.

may also be used for preschool programs, community engagement supports, and job training. This grant program was funded at \$10 million in FY 2017 and is part of Title IV of the ESEA.¹⁷

Additional Programs. The U.S. Department of Education also provides funding for school safety efforts through other assorted programs.

- **Promoting Student Resilience Grants.** The federally funded School Safety National Activities umbrella includes Promoting Student Resilience Grants that provide federal funding to LEAs in communities that have “experienced significant civil unrest to help address the comprehensive behavioral and mental health needs of students.”¹⁸ The grants are designed to fund capacity building in LEAs to address the behavioral and mental health needs of students in schools that have experienced significant civil unrest in the past two years. Approximately \$4.7 million was appropriated for the Promoting Student Resilience Program in FY 2016 and is authorized under Title III of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016.¹⁹
- **School Climate Transformation Grants.** School Climate Transformation Grants provide federal funding to schools under Title IV of the ESEA to supplement evidence-based practices for improving student learning conditions. Eligible projects include capacity building for establishing school-wide, multi-tiered behavioral frameworks and school training to improve behavioral outcomes of students. Approximately \$36 million was available in continuation grants for the program in 2016, which is authorized under Title IV of the ESEA.²⁰

- **Project Prevent Grant Program.** The Project Prevent Grants Program has directed millions to school districts with pervasive violence to help pay for counseling and conflict resolution. The grants are intended to help schools identify, assess, and serve students exposed to pervasive violence; ensure that affected students are offered mental health services for trauma or anxiety; support conflict-resolution programs; and implement other strategies in order to reduce the likelihood that these students will later commit violent acts. The Project Prevent Grant program is also authorized under the ESEA and includes an estimated \$9.7 million in available funds.²¹

- **21st Century Community Learning Centers Program.** Some funding under Part B of Title IV of the ESEA, which authorizes the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, can be used for violence prevention.

Proposed Federal Changes

Congress is currently considering changes to federal laws that impact school safety. Representative John Rutherford (R-FL) and Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) have introduced proposals in the House and the Senate to provide new federal funding to states to offset the cost associated with evidence-based programs to prevent school shootings. The proposals would enable states to use these funds to develop and operate school threat-assessment intervention teams and coordinate with local law enforcement, among other purposes. Notably, the Senate version of the proposal would partially offset the cost through funding that had previously been allocated to the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative operated by the DOJ.²²

17. Community Schools, “ESEA Reauthorization a Game Changing Moment for Community Schools,” <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/blast%20to%20field.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2018).

18. U.S. Department of Education, “Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Summary and Background Information,” <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget18/summary/18summary.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2018).

19. U.S. Department of Education, “Promoting Student Resilience,” August 2016, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/student-resilience/funding.html> (accessed March 12, 2018).

20. U.S. Department of Education, “School Climate Transformation Grant—Local Educational Agency Grants,” September 2016, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/schoolclimatelea/awards.html> (accessed March 12, 2018).

21. U.S. Department of Education, “Project Prevent Grant Program,” April 29, 2014, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/projectprevent/funding.html> (accessed March 12, 2018).

22. John G. Malcolm and Lindsey Burke, “Here’s What Congress is Doing to Tackle School Safety,” *The Daily Signal*, Marcy 7, 2018, <http://dailysignal.com/2018/03/07/heres-congress-tackle-school-safety/>.

Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), the chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, has proposed providing flexibility to states with the funding allocated under Titles II and IV of the ESEA, thus enabling states to put those existing funds toward efforts to strengthen school safety. Title II of the ESEA authorizes federal programs largely geared toward teacher professional development and class size reduction. However, the U.S. Department of Education notes that “many class size and professional development activities have resulted in negligible impacts for many students,”²³ a point that is borne out in a larger body of research on the subject.²⁴ Senator Alexander’s proposal would also leverage funding under Title IV, which, as previously discussed, provides federal funds for the SSAE Grant program, among other services.

Recommendations for State Agencies

- **Increase information sharing and collaboration among states.** State agencies should establish policies that help local school leaders better coordinate school safety efforts. As previously outlined, State School Safety Center representatives report difficulty in sharing their school safety efforts with other states. State agencies should develop frameworks for collecting and sharing information about best practices in school safety, and engage in cross-state collaboration on school safety efforts.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- **Provide states flexibility in the use of federal funding.** State and local school leaders have the contextual knowledge to find school safety solutions that fit the needs of their communities. By providing flexibility under Titles II and IV of the ESEA, Congress can empower states with more control of the dollars that are currently spent under the ESEA, enabling states and localities to prioritize school safety.

- **Strengthen inter-agency communication.** SSSC representatives noted the challenges created by having multiple federal agencies involved in school safety, particularly when federal agencies supply conflicting guidance to states. Federal agencies should strengthen communication between agencies, in order to ensure subsequent guidance issued to states in the wake of school crises is consistent and clearly conveyed.

Conclusion

Crisis events in schools understandably increase scrutiny on existing policies. States have considerable tools at their disposal, such as a wide network of State School Safety Centers and existing federal funding to supplement state and local spending for strengthening school safety protocols. Re-examining how these existing efforts are implemented suggests the need for increased collaboration among states, and new flexibility for states when it comes to the use of existing federal funds. These two achievable steps could provide a promising path forward to enhancing the safety of all students in public schools across the country.

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23. U.S. Department of Education, “Non-Regulatory Guidance for Title II, Part A: Building Systems of Support for Excellent Teaching and Leading,” September 27, 2016, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essatitleiipartaguidance.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2018).

24. Eric A. Hanushek, “Boosting Teacher Effectiveness,” in Chester E. Finn Jr. and Richard Sousa, eds., *What Lies Ahead for America’s Children and Their Schools* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2014), https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/finnsousa_whatliesahead_final_ch2.pdf (accessed March 12, 2018).