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## **Are Current Security Protocols The Best Use of Funds In Public Schools**

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For many, the mass shooting at Columbine marked a dark era in which school shootings would become far too familiar. Since that fateful day in 1999, there have been more than 245 school shootings injuring more than 310 people and killing at least 146.<sup>1</sup> The question we are forced to grapple with is not whether intervention is necessary but whether the current direction in spending is the most effective to confront the problem while ensuring the best possible outcomes for students

School security has become a \$3 billion annual industry, with a great deal of funding focused on policing. A growing number of security and education professionals believe offering wraparound services to students and their families can effectively curb student violence and increase student persistence (Blanchard, 2021).

"Wraparound services refer to resources and activities an organization or individual provides to assist a student in persisting to graduation, professional development, and holistic growth. Some examples of wraparound services include tutoring, food assistance, professional development, mentoring/coaching, life skills training, financial assistance/financial education, and socialization components."<sup>2</sup>

### **Current School Spending Trends**

According to extant data, taxpayers spend approximately \$700 billion per year on K-12 public schooling. This upward trend in spending shows no signs of slowing in the foreseeable future. Of the \$700 billion spent on education, at least \$2.7 billion is spent on costs identified as security. Security costs include everything from automatically locking doors to surveillance and facial recognition software. Armed guards (usually police officers classified as resource officers) have an increased presence, especially at inner-city schools (McDonald, 2019).

The presence of armed guards and even military personnel at public schools has led some to fear the militarization of public schools across the country (McDonald, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> (Wong, 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Michael K. Blanchard, (2021), A Community Research Guide to Student Persistence: Research-based Strategies to Improve Student Persistence

Growing national concern about police violence has led many school districts to remove armed resource officers from their classrooms (Goldstein, 2020).

Like the one in Parkland, FL, that left 17 people dead, mass shootings seem to justify the exorbitant spending on enhanced security and training mechanisms . However, mass shootings at schools are exceedingly rare (McDonald, 2019).

### **Proper Framing for Better Context**

One observation is that much of the financial resources used on resource officers and security training are focused on schools where mass shootings are least likely to happen (Gaughan, Cerio, & Myers, 2021). According to an article written by Meghan Keneally, the 11 deadliest school shootings since the Columbine massacre have happened at suburban schools with predominantly white middle-class students.<sup>3</sup>

While violence is an issue in inner-city schools that predominantly serve African American and Latin American students, the type of violence and the catalyst for violence is distinct from the dynamic surrounding most mass school shootings. Mass shootings are usually the result of some form of psychotic break. In contrast, violence in inner-city schools is likely associated with poverty, poor socialization, and a lack of effective wraparound services (Blanchard, 2021; Stevenson H. C., 2015; Stevenson H. C., 2006; Wallace R. , Born in Captivity:

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<sup>3</sup> (Keneally, 2019) The 11 mass deadly school shootings that happened since columbine

<sup>4</sup> (Weichselbaum & Thomas, 2019) More cops. Is it the answer to fighting crime?

Psychopathology As a Legacy of Slavery, 2017).

"Safety and security is just one facet of wraparound services that no one considers. It sets the school climate for success in every other aspect of the learning experience." ~ Michael K. Blanchard, Ed.D.

There is a growing demand for school districts, and State education departments start to address violence at the source instead of focusing on the symptoms. Instead of pouring mastodonic amounts of money into efforts to police students, it may be more efficacious to invest in providing wraparound services that address core issues that contribute to violent behavior in these schools.

Dr. Blanchard is diligent in highlighting the nefarious impact of turning schools into mini-prisons. Instead of funding the militarization and weaponization of personnel on school campuses, funding can be better used to provide wraparound services that address mental health, food scarcity, Black business creation, and proper education curriculum/pedagogy. Additional wraparound services include emergency fund assistance for homeless students' families.

Despite common philosophical reasonings, there is no evidence that an increased police presence reduces violence and crime.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>5</sup> (Rosalsky, 2021)When you add more police to a city, what happens?

The growing demand for police reform should be enough to create a pause in the notion that hyper-policing young students will make an ideal learning environment. The Sentencing Project, an advocacy organization for the under-represented, points to the empirical data that suggests adding police to a school environment is counterproductive and even physically harmful to the students.

In fact, The Sentencing Project falls in direct alignment with the sentiments of Dr. Blanchard:

"Research to date has demonstrated that it is counterproductive for public safety goals to add more police to schools. In order to reduce violence and promote educational objectives, it is far more effective to provide the nation's children with the necessary resources to support their emotional, mental and scholastic development through strong environments."

The introduction of armed resource officers to inner-city schools has resulted in an expansion of juvenile justice referrals. A 2009 study using data compiled from 2,270 U.S. schools determined that schools using law enforcement officers reported offenses to the police at a significantly higher rate than schools no using such officers (Torres & Stefkovich, 2009).

There have been instances where children as young as five years old have been placed in handcuffs while at school — a practice especially true concerning young Black males. While at school, handcuffing students for poor behavior is a form of premature criminalization, which grooms them for

early entry into the Prison Industrial Complex.

## **The Benefits of Student Persistence**

A minimal perspicacity of student persistence and its benefits must be obtained to grasp the importance of wraparound services. Student persistence refers to the continuation in striving and effort to face and overcome the inherent difficulty and challenges of completing secondary education. Student persistence is about more than the earning of a degree. It is also about the mindset that accompanies significant accomplishments. The ability to persist in college can translate to the ability to persist through challenging times in life.

As a student persists, they develop increasing levels of self-efficacy and self-confidence.

At lower education levels, such as high school, persistence is critical, especially for Blacks and Latino boys. A Black or Latino male who does not finish high school is 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than a four-year college graduate and six times more likely to be incarcerated than those with only a high school diploma (Wandrei, 2021).

Even for students who will eventually end up working in a different field than they have earned their degree, there are still benefits. Many employers require a degree of some kind, even if it is in another area of study.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, earning a degree will increase access to job opportunities.

Earning a degree is often the first step in preparing for a specialized career. There are some careers in which having a degree is

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<sup>6</sup> (Joubert, 2020)

non-negotiable. Increasing empirical data reveals that holding a bachelor's degree increases marketability in the job market.

Increased earning potential and economic stability are two more benefits directly associated with student persistence.

There is a great deal at stake when it comes to increasing student persistence. One way to facilitate student persistence is through wraparound services (Blanchard, 2021; Kinsey, 2021).

### **Wraparound Services vs. Heighten Police Presence**

The concern of many social experts is that schools are beginning to resemble prisons. Boston College psychology professor, Peter Gray, addresses it this way:

"Everyone who has ever been to school knows that school is a prison, but almost nobody beyond school age says it is. It's not polite."<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, Gray wrote this in his book, *Free to Learn* in 2013 — before that massive rise in police presence on public school campuses. Gray was referring to that lack of true freedom in the public education system. He was focusing on the fact that students are compelled to attend school by law and the threat of prosecution. Public school students are unable to leave voluntarily. Additionally, students are told what to do, when to do it, and forced to participate in a standardized curriculum that may not be properly suited for their learning style.

Gray's primary stance does not consider increasing school security as a direct

response to the rise in school shootings. For example, Tennessee is allocating \$50 million to place a police officer in every school.<sup>8</sup> The force behind the increase in police presence in public schools is likely more political than based on the efficacy of the practice itself. First, most school shootings occur in schools where the primary attendees are from upwardly mobile families (Staff, 2021). Therefore, placing police officers in inner-city schools will have little to no impact on reducing mass school shootings since these shootings don't take place on inner-city campuses.

After the deadly Parkland school shooting where 17 people were killed, the state legislature mandated an armed guard at every school. Ironically, Parkland had an armed guard present at the time of the shooting. The guard chose not to enter the school and engage the shooter — and was subsequently forced to resign.

Many experts hold firm to the belief that having armed guards at schools will not guarantee safety. Many suggest that it may be more harmful.

"Transforming schools into armed camps does more to elevate fear than alleviate it." ~ James Alan Fox, Northeastern Criminology Professor

Fox points to the fact that while school shootings are devastating, they are extremely rare.

A notable response to the increase in police presence at schools is a rise in parents removing their students from public schools for alternative methods of educating their

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<sup>7</sup> (Gray, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> (McDonald, Policing the Public Schools: How Schools Are Becoming Even More Like Prisons, 2019)

children. A recent article in the Seattle Times highlighted that more Black families in the Seattle area are choosing to homeschool their children. While the dynamic behind this rise is complex, one of the reasons given by those polled is the over-criminalization of Black children in the Seattle schools system. When police officers in schools are viewed as aggressive and threatening, it defeats the purpose of making children and teachers feel safe.

Both authors' position that funding programs that ensure the quality of education and the assurance of outcomes would be more efficacious than the aesthetic response of throwing firepower at an illusion. Children are much more at risk for not persisting than being shot in a school shooting.

Wraparound services are any resource or activity an organization or individual provides to assist a student in persisting to graduation, professional development, or holistic growth. Some examples of wraparound services include tutoring, food assistance, professional development, mentoring/coaching, life skills training, financial aid, financial education, and socialization skills.

A wise investment of available funds would consist of funding mental health resources, confronting food scarcity in underserved communities, creating Black and minority businesses, and more. Food scarcity, urban blight, the lack of affordable housing, and mental health issues are all a part of what is known as urban hassle. (Wallace R. , 2020; Wallace R. , 2017). Urban hassle is one of the top-five contributors to African American adolescent and young adult male violence. Addressing these issues will subsequently have an impact on the

proclivity toward violence in these communities. Socialization programs are a part of wraparound services, which is important since the lack of proper socialization is the second most prevalent influencer associated with African American adolescent and young adult male violence (Wallace D. , 2007; Stevenson H. C., 2015; Stevenson H. C., 2006; DeGruy, 2009; Wallace R. , 2017).

There is enough pragmatic and empirical data available to substantiate that focusing on student persistence through wraparound services will likely have the secondary effect of reducing on-campus violence — especially among males.

The overwhelming consensus among scholars and experts is that over-policing does not reduce crime. Nor does it help to improve the quality of life of those living in impoverished areas. Resources provided through wraparound services and policies that economically strengthen families — helping them achieve independence — are the key to improving future outcomes for the underserved.

## **Conclusion**

We have a responsibility to our children to provide them with optimal opportunities to prepare for life in a way that empowers them to be competitive in a world that will often be hostile and unforgiving. We must resist the proclivity for kneejerk responses to social issues that lacks the necessary validity, credibility, and viability of the assurances of efficacy backed by empirical data. We don't have the latitude to gamble with our children's future — not if we genuinely believe that they are our future.

Increasing the police presence in schools may have some form of political expediency, but it offers very little in the way of authentic solutions to the enigmatic issues plaguing our inner cities. We cannot divorce the dynamic at play in our schools from the universal reality experienced in the surrounding communities. A child who is starving and fearful at home will not perform well in the classroom. If that child does not perform well in the classroom, chances are they will struggle throughout life. Early successes in learning directly impact the development of a child's self-concept — directly impacting their self-esteem and self-confidence. Throwing millions upon millions of dollars at a highly over-emphasized problem only serves to create a bureaucracy through which the wheels of progressive solutions turn increasingly slower.

Students need to feel safe, but all of the evidence suggests that the presence of armed officers does not guarantee a feeling of safety. In fact, it often has the opposite effect due to the disintegrating trust in law enforcement at the national level.

Rather than deterring mass shootings, armed guards have served to increase the criminalization of students they should be protecting. Some studies suggest that police personnel on school campuses lead to more arrests for non-violent crimes and do very little to modify student behavior. The rise in arrests and other extreme disciplinary measures often trusts children into the criminal justice system at an immensely early age. They will be labeled as criminal-minded, oppositionally defiant, incorrigible, and more. These types of practices only serve to fuel the "School-to-Prison pipeline. These practices disproportionately impact,

more times than not, the minority and needy children, making it all but impossible to avoid the paved path to prison. In 2016, for example, 50,000 preschoolers were either suspended or expelled from school. Black preschoolers were suspended or removed at twice the rate of their non-Black peers. States like Texas have even passed bills that will allow military personnel to police schools. Having the military in our schools is akin to Marshal Law.

While safety has to be a concern, the goal should be equipping and empowering students to get the most out of their education to be prepared to be competitive in life. The increased armed presence is not conducive to achieving the ideal environment for learning. Of course, it allows politicians to grandstand on how they are making schools safe to help them garner support for reelection. The problem remains that our children are not any safer, and they are not learning.

The use of holistic wraparound services for students and their families would be a better use of funds now allocated to militarizing schools. Wraparound services address many of the Delphic issues that plague inner-city communities. Our fight to educate our children must be viewed through the paradigmatic lens of collectivism and community. The problems experienced in our schools are not due to isolated dynamics exclusive to the school environment. Children bring their realities to school with them each day. If those realities are not conducive to learning, the child will struggle, and their chance at persistence will diminish. To put it succinctly, the best way to help our children is by providing them with the resources that will empower them to help themselves.

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