School Safety in New Mexico and the United States: A Landscape Analysis

For students to thrive academically and socially, it is vital the learning environment is safe, inclusive, and supportive.

Ensuring the safety of a school community through a holistic approach necessitates a focus not only on protection, mitigation, and response to threats, but also on longer-term prevention strategies. While physical safety and emergency response are important components of school safety, perhaps even more essential is the culture fostered by students, staff, and families, and the steps taken to ensure student wellbeing. In recent years, school safety guidance from the United States (U.S.) Department of Justice and other sources has focused on this multi-faceted approach.

Over the course of the 2024 interim, LESC staff will produce a two-part school safety report for legislators. In this first installment, staff will examine existing trends and practices both nationwide and here in New Mexico to better understand the school safety landscape as it currently exists. A second portion of the report will provide policy and budget recommendations to the Legislature in November 2024 ahead of the 2025 legislative session.

National Trends in School Safety and Student Wellbeing

The safety needs of kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) students and educators are ever-evolving nationwide, and while the specific conditions facing students will vary from state to state, national trends can give policymakers a useful sense of the common challenges reported by schools across the United States.

Student Mental Health

Student mental health is a key contributor to a student's academic success. Research has found that mental health conditions like anxiety and depression are linked to reduced academic performance. Beyond the classroom, students struggling with their mental health are more likely to contemplate or engage in suicide or self-harm, experience disciplinary issues, and be chronically absent from school.

Key Takeaways

While physical safety and emergency response are important components of school safety, perhaps even more essential is the culture fostered by students, staff, and families and the steps taken to ensure student wellbeing.
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Creating safe schools necessarily includes prevention strategies to identify and address risks to school safety before incidents occur.
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Debates over school safety in the United States have repeatedly come on the heels of school shootings.
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In the second installment of LESC's school safety report, staff will use lessons learned from this landscape analysis and broader research to provide policy and budgetary recommendations to lawmakers.
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Nationally, the rate of children aged 3 to 17 experiencing anxiety or depression has been increasing in recent years. According to findings published in the 2022 KIDS COUNT Data Book by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this percentage increased from nine percent to 12 percent between 2016 and 2020.

In the Institute of Education Sciences' 2022 School Pulse Panel, nearly 70 percent of U.S. public schools reported an increase in students seeking mental health services since the start of the pandemic. In turn, 76 percent of schools indicated increased staff concerns about students' mental wellness.

This upward trend in student mental health challenges comes as school officials are expressing doubts about their ability to effectively provide mental health services for their students. In the 2024 School Pulse Panel survey, just 48 percent of all public school respondents either strongly or moderately agree that their school is effective in providing school-based mental health services.

Behavior and Safety

Since the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, educators nationwide have drawn attention to the increase in student behavior issues when compared to pre-pandemic levels. Many point to the toll pandemic disruptions took on students' development of interpersonal skills. In a 2022 EAB (formerly known as the Education Advisory Board) survey of educators, 84 percent of respondents believed students are lagging behind in the development of both self-regulation and relationship-building skills.

EAB survey results also depicted a sharp increase in the amount of physical violence seen in schools since 2018, when 15 percent of respondents observed frequent physical fights between students and 7 percent observed physical violence against teachers. In 2022, those percentages increased to 34 percent and 13 percent, respectively.

This increase in physical violence on school campuses tracks with a noted national rise in the percentage of students missing school due to safety concerns. In 2021, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data shows 8.6 percent of high school students surveyed nationally reported missing school out of fear for their safety. In 1993, just 4.4 percent of students in the U.S. reported being absent for safety reasons. This percentage gradually increased nationwide between 1993 and 2013, declined between 2013 and 2015, then resumed its upward trend to a peak of 8.7 percent in 2019.
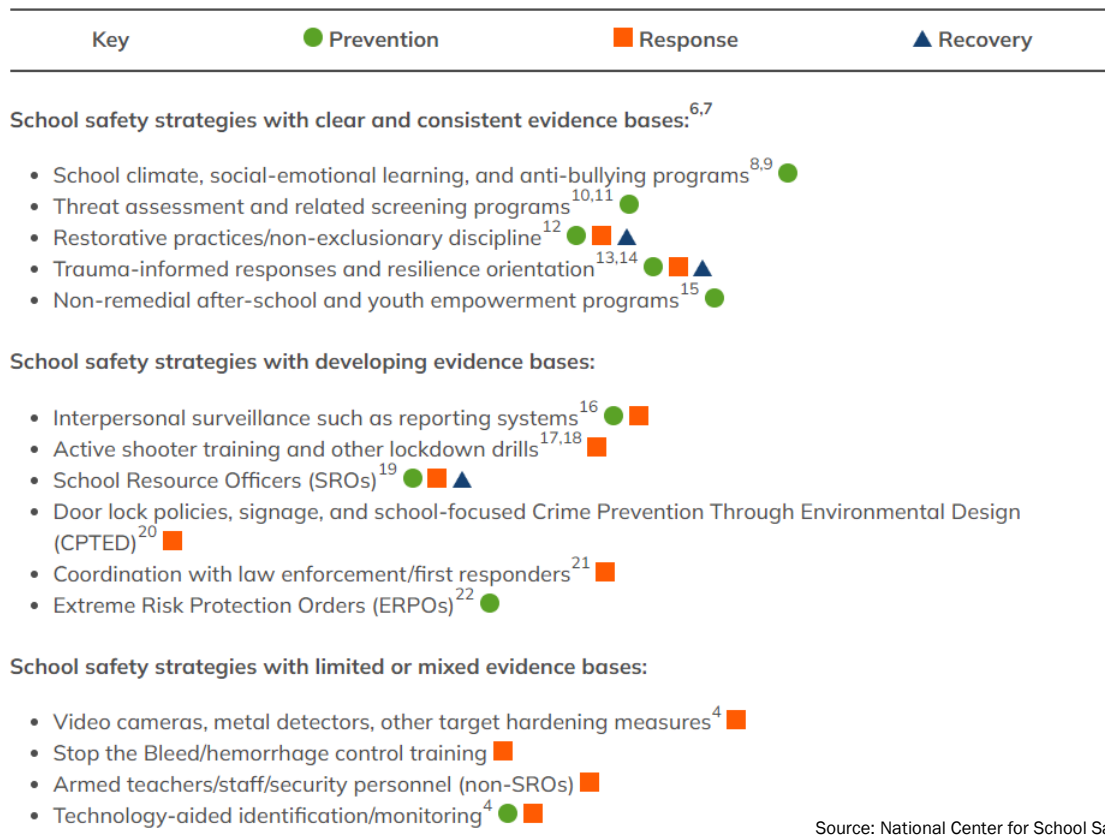
Hardening of Schools

In the United States, particularly after school shootings, approaches to school safety have frequently been geared toward increasing physical security measures in facilities. These measures include the installation of security cameras, the adoption of panic button technology, school-based law enforcement, and arming of school personnel, among others as part of a broader effort to "harden" the security apparatus of the building.

Effectiveness of Physical Security Measures. It is important to note the majority of research on the effectiveness of these "hardening" measures to reduce firearm violence and other safety challenges finds physical measures have minimal on safety risks for schools. While the use of *multiple* visible security measures (cameras, metal detectors, security personnel) have been shown to reduce exposure to property crime, the use of

various physical, visible security measures does not appear to reduce students' exposure to violence or drugs.

Additionally, a 2024 analysis of data from the 2017 National Crime Victimization Survey found that none of the nine security measures included in the survey (ranging from locked doors and locker checks to metal detectors and security cameras) were associated with a lower likelihood of bullying victimization among students.

The graphic shown below from the National Center for School Safety provides an overview of research findings on various school safety measures.

| Key | ● Prevention | ■ Response | ▲ Recovery |

School safety strategies with clear and consistent evidence bases:[6,7]

- School climate, social-emotional learning, and anti-bullying programs[8,9] ●
- Threat assessment and related screening programs[10,11] ●
- Restorative practices/non-exclusionary discipline[12] ● ■ ▲
- Trauma-informed responses and resilience orientation[13,14] ● ■ ▲
- Non-remedial after-school and youth empowerment programs[15] ●

School safety strategies with developing evidence bases:

- Interpersonal surveillance such as reporting systems[16] ● ■
- Active shooter training and other lockdown drills[17,18] ■
- School Resource Officers (SROs)[19] ● ■ ▲
- Door lock policies, signage, and school-focused Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)[20] ■
- Coordination with law enforcement/first responders[21] ■
- Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs)[22] ●

School safety strategies with limited or mixed evidence bases:

- Video cameras, metal detectors, other target hardening measures[4] ■
- Stop the Bleed/hemorrhage control training ■
- Armed teachers/staff/security personnel (non-SROs) ■
- Technology-aided identification/monitoring[4] ● ■

Source: National Center for School Safety

Impacts on Safety Perceptions. A 2018 study from the *American Journal of Criminal Justice* indicated that increases in school security measures did not improve students' or parents' perceptions of safety. Instead, the findings revealed that a greater number of security measures were associated with *decreased* perceptions of safety for students.

Security Personnel. School security personnel, such as school resource officers (SROs) or security guards, are a standard presence in many American schools. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there has been a moderate increase in the percentage of schools with security personnel on-site at least once per week since the 2015-2016 school year, when 56.5 percent of U.S. public schools reported the presence of security personnel. In the 2021-2022 school year, that percentage increased to 60.6 percent of schools nationally.

The presence of security personnel, particularly school resource officers (SROs), has been associated with a notable surge in arrests with disorderly conduct charges. In a 2009 study

in the *Journal of Criminal Justice*, the presence of an SRO in a school (without controlling for economic disadvantage) led to a 402.3 percent increase in disorderly conduct arrest rates per 100 students.

In a 2018 policy brief from the University of Texas at Austin, a review of data from Texas public schools between 1998 and 2008 finds those receiving federal grant funding for school police had a corresponding 2.5 percent decrease in graduation rates and a 4 percent decline in college enrollment. In Texas middle schools, researchers noted a 6 percent increase in disciplinary rates. These effects were especially significant for Black students and low-income students, with 7 percent disciplinary rate increases for Black middle school students reported and declining college enrollment being concentrated among low-income students.

Security Cameras. In the case of security cameras, a 2018 study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found the impact of cameras on students' perception of safety varies depending on the camera locations. When placed outside the building, students report feeling safer. However, when cameras are located throughout the building's interior, research found the use of security cameras was related to lower perceptions of safety, equity, and support. Instead, students reported feeling like they were seen as perpetrators-in-waiting rather than children in need of protection.

Metal Detectors. There is little evidence to suggest metal detectors are an effective strategy to reduce threats to schools. While intended to promote greater security and safety, research on this topic broadly concludes metal detectors tend to have the opposite effect on student's perceptions of safety.

In NCES data from the 2021-2022 school year, while 6.2 percent of public schools were reported to have random metal detector checks on students, the prevalence of these measures tended to be higher in schools with a greater percentage of students of color. In public schools with 76 to 100 percent of students of color, 11.9 percent reported having random metal detector checks (compared to 3.7 percent for schools with 0 to 25 percent of students of color).

A Systems-Based Approach. Physical security measures *on their own* are likely insufficient to reduce safety risks for schools and can have adverse impacts on student wellbeing. As outlined in a 2021 report published by the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit policy think tank and research institute, a systems-based approach to physical security recognizes the role of physical measures as one layer of a larger strategy encompassing three key aspects of school safety that build upon and work in tandem with one another:

1. **Prevention:** These efforts aim to reduce threats and improve a school's ability to identify and respond to potential risks at an early stage. Measures in this category include programs to support student mental health, the fostering of a positive school climate, addressing bullying and cyberbullying, and threat assessment and reporting procedures.

2. **Protection and Mitigation:** The goal of this layer is to detect and mitigate the impact of school-related threats. Many physical security measures such as cameras, door locks, or security personnel fall into this category.

3. **Response and Recovery:** This final layer of the systems-based approach prioritizes a swift response to address consequences from an incident and return a

school to standard operating procedures. Measures in this category can include emergency medical services, reunification procedures, and mental health supports.

School Climate and Culture

School Connectedness and Educator/Student Relationship Building. School climate is an integral part of the school safety landscape. [Official guidance](#) from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services' (COPS) School Safety Working Group emphasizs the importance of fostering a welcoming, connected learning environment.

Relationships are a central element of school climate and culture. A 2017 [review](#) of educational research on teacher-student relationships found positive relationships with teachers led to greater student engagement with school, fewer disruptive behaviors, improved academic performance and attendance, and reduced suspension and dropout rates, among other benefits.

A wealth of research demonstrates teachers have a greater impact on student achievement and wellbeing than any other in-school factor.

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Education. Culturally and linguistically responsive education is integral to promoting school safety by creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all students. Acknowledging and valuing students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds fosters inclusivity and respect, reducing instances of discrimination, bias, and bullying. Educators trained in culturally responsive teaching can build stronger, more trusting relationships with their students, which reduces conflicts and enhances the overall sense of safety. Additionally, this type of education addresses potential misunderstandings and conflicts arising from cultural and linguistic differences, promoting a harmonious school atmosphere.

Effective communication, supported by culturally responsive practices, ensures students and their families understand school policies, safety procedures, and behavioral expectations, which helps prevent misunderstandings and ensures readiness in emergencies. Overall, ongoing professional development in cultural and linguistic responsiveness for educators is essential for handling potential safety issues and creating a positive, inclusive school climate.

By addressing systemic inequities and promoting equity in educational opportunities and disciplinary practices, schools can reduce conflict and promote a fairer environment.

Chronic Absenteeism

Regular attendance not only enhances student academic achievement but also helps students feel connected and supported, which is vital for preventing violence, bullying, and other safety concerns.

New Mexico state law defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more of classes or school days, equivalent to two days per month or 18 days in a 180-day school year. According to Public Education Department (PED) data, the state has seen a significant surge in chronic absenteeism rates in recent years, with a 39.2 percent rate in the 2022-2023 school year, slightly down from 40.7 percent the previous year. In comparison, the national chronic absence rate was 29.7 percent in the 2021-2022 school year, according to an analysis of national data by [Attendance Works](#), a nonprofit organization with a focus on reducing chronic absence.

When students are frequently absent, they may feel disconnected from their peers and teachers, increasing the risk of bullying, violence, and other safety concerns. Chronic absenteeism can also lead to a lack of engagement, making students more vulnerable to harmful influences outside of school.

One significant factor contributing to chronic absenteeism is students' aversion to school. A 2023 LESC report identified aversion to school as a major issue. Additional barriers and challenges impacting students include trauma, lack of health or mental health care, poor transportation, food insecurity and other consequences from low socio-economic status. Addressing these underlying issues is essential to reducing absenteeism and ensuring that students can fully benefit from the educational and safety resources available to them.

Preventative Measures

Creating safe schools necessarily includes prevention strategies to identify and address risks to school safety before incidents occur. Research shows prevention strategies—restorative practices and non-exclusionary discipline; trauma-informed responses and resilience orientation; school climate, social emotional learning, and anti-bullying programs; and threat assessment and related screening programs-- have the strongest evidence base in reducing violence.

School Discipline

Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative justice practices (RJP) in schools are innovative approaches that focus on repairing harm, fostering a sense of community, and promoting accountability rather than relying solely on punitive measures. These practices involve open dialogue and collaborative problem-solving among students, teachers, and other educational staff to address conflicts and misconduct.

RJP is an effective method for promoting equity in schools. Research shows RJP can mitigate the impact of implicit bias, which often leads to disproportionate punitive discipline for students of color and students with disabilities. This disproportionate discipline contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline and exacerbates inequities within the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems.

By focusing on responsibility-based consequences, RJP aims to repair harm while teaching essential life and character-building skills. Additionally, RJP enhances social and emotional relationship skills and improves conflict resolution skills.

Research shows restorative and non-exclusionary discipline programs reduce violence at school. PED tracks disciplinary data from New Mexico schools through the Nova data collection system (formerly known as the Student Teacher Accountability Reporting System or STARS). Local education agencies (LEAs) across the state submit reports to PED on the 40th, 80th, 120th, and last days of the school year. Discipline data includes information on student infractions and the response by staff to address the infraction.

PED is in the process of creating a student discipline dashboard that will display student disciplinary infraction data starting with the 2014-2015 school year for all schools. According to the preliminary data currently available on the dashboard PED shared with LESC staff, in the 2022-2023 school year—the most recent data available—4.4 percent of discipline responses statewide used a restorative justice approach.

As the discipline dashboard is still a work in progress, to provide a snapshot of discipline trends in New Mexico and highlight restorative work currently in place, LESC gathered data from Peñasco Independent School District. This district has implemented restorative discipline practices in recent years with the help of Poms & Associates. Through Poms & Associates.

Suspension and Expulsion. In an effort to maintain a safe learning environment, schools may resort to suspending or expelling students who engage in violent or disruptive behavior. While these measures temporarily remove violent or disruptive students from classrooms, they often do not address underlying issues, potentially leading to repeated offenses and a cycle of disciplinary actions.

Poms & Associates Insurance Brokers, LLC, is the designated risk management partner of the New Mexico Public Schools Insurance Authority.

The graph to the right shows consequence data in Peñasco Middle School and High School for the school years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Blank entries on the chart indicate a lack of data, whereas entries of zero reflect instances where available data reported this specific value. Overall, the graph highlights the types of disciplinary incidents and their corresponding consequences, indicating a shift towards using wellness rooms and restorative practices more in the recent school year, particularly in middle schools.

In FY24, the Legislature appropriated $200 thousand to fund a PED-led pilot program for wellness rooms in public and charter schools. In FY25, the Legislature continued to fund wellness rooms with an appropriation of $200 thousand.

In Peñasco, out-of-school suspension was the most common measure, particularly in the 2022-2023 school year, with 18 middle school students and eight high school students suspended.

Graph 1. Consequence Data for Peñasco Middle School and High School
School Year 2022-2023 and 2023-2024

Source: LESC Data/Peñasco Middle School and High School

By the 2023-2024 school year, these numbers decreased to nine for middle school and two for high school. With the new intervention practices adopted by Peñasco Independent School District for the 2023-2024 school year, alternative consequence measures have served 13 middle school students. Specifically, five students used wellness rooms and eight participated in restorative practices, whereas no high school students are receiving these intervention services in the data provided to LESC.

LESC staff also reviewed statewide suspension and expulsion data available on PED's student discipline dashboard for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. This data included in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions and modified expulsions (with educational services).
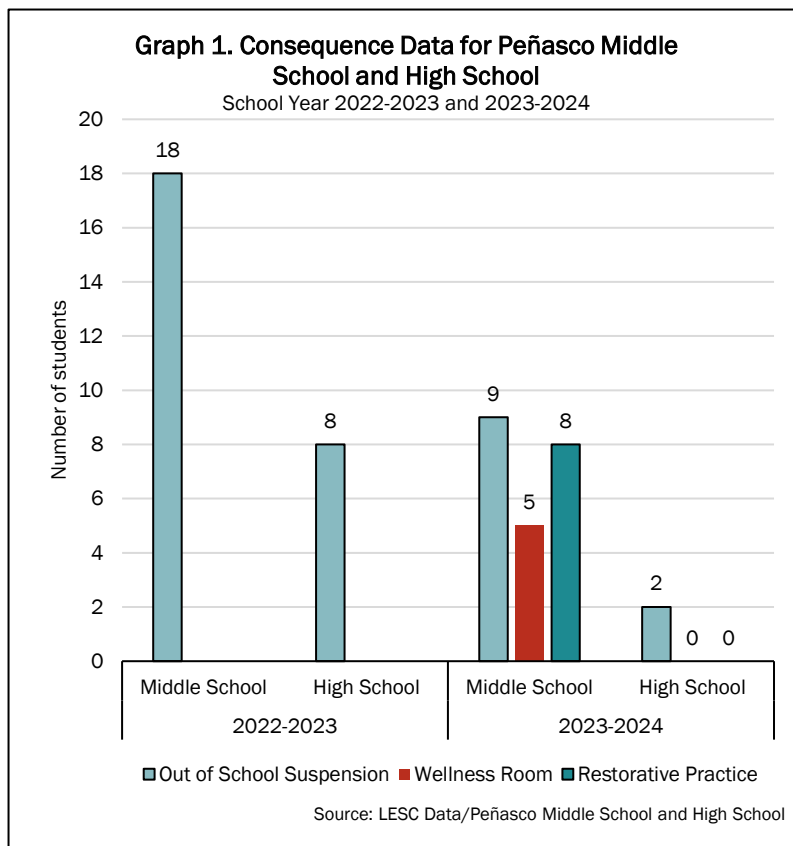
In 2022-2023, there were 7,157 in-school suspensions (down 11 percent from 2021-2022), 17,744 out-of-school suspensions (down six percent from 2021-2022), 39 expulsions (down 51 percent from 2021-2022), and 37 modified expulsions (down 29 percent from 2021-2022).

During the 2022-2023 school year, violence was the leading reason for in-school suspensions (71 percent) and out-of-school suspensions (61 percent). Weapons, substance abuse, or gang activity (W/SA/Gang) was the leading reason for expulsions (41 percent), while violence was the number reason for modified expulsions (46 percent).

New Mexico Prevention, Response, and Resiliency Program. New Mexico has proactively addressed issues related to discipline and attendance through PED's Safe and Healthy Schools Bureau. This bureau operates the New Mexico Prevention, Response, and Resiliency Program (PRRP), which is dedicated to fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment.

Table 1. Participating NMPRRP Schools	
School Year 2022-2023 Cohort 1	**School Year 2023-2024 Cohort 2**
Bernalillo High School	Capitan Middle School/High School
Chaparral Elementary School	El Capitan Elementary School
Chaparral High School	Harrison Middle School
Cien Aguas International School	James Bickley Elementary School
Mark Armijo Academy	Los Alamos High School
Mesa Middle School	Mosaic Academy
Monte del Sol Charter School	The New America School
Rio Gallinas Charter School	Santa Teresa High School
Sierra Middle School	Solare Collegiate (APS Charter)
South Valley Academy	Taos High School
Taos Schools: Taos Charter School	University High School
Tierra Adentro of New Mexico	

The PRRP program utilizes a comprehensive three-tier framework grounded in restorative justice principles, focusing on building and fostering strong, supportive communities, implementing effective systems and structures, and teaching social emotional learning (SEL) skills. This approach enables participating schools, listed to the right in Table 1 by cohort, to create a holistic and inclusive environment that promotes student wellbeing, accountability, and success.

Bullying

Bullying typically includes verbal harassment, the spreading of rumors, or deliberate exclusion from activities, and has long been a challenge in schools and can have significant consequences for a person's wellbeing in school and beyond.

Students' experience with bullying varies by race and ethnicity, as well as by sex and sexual orientation.

National Trends. In the ten-year period between 2009 and 2019, as shown in the 2022 Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety, there was a clear downward trend in the percentage of U.S. students aged 12-18 who reported being bullied. In 2009, 28 percent of these students reported experiencing bullying, while 22 percent did so in 2019.

Students' experiences with bullying varied depending on their race or ethnicity. In 2019, 37 percent of students of two or more races reported experiencing bullying, while White, Black, and Hispanic, and Asian students reported lower levels (25, 22, 18, and 13 percent, respectively).

Reported incidents of bullying also varied by sex, with a greater share (25 percent) of female students indicating they had been the victims of bullying than their male peers (19 percent).

New Mexico's Approach to Bullying. In 2019, the New Mexico Legislature enacted the Safe Schools for All Students Act, mandating school districts develop and implement robust bullying prevention policies. These policies must encompass clear definitions, reporting and investigation protocols, consequences that don't involve suspension or expulsion, and annual training for students and staff. Moreover, the policies must ensure meticulous documentation and record-keeping for a minimum of four years. The ultimate goal of this legislation was to prevent bullying and cyberbullying in schools and during school-sponsored events, fostering a secure and supportive environment conducive to learning.

In 2021, the New Mexico's Children's Cabinet reported on bullying data comparing trends from 2019 to 2021. The data showed bullying rates decreased on public school property, with 42 percent of middle school students and 14 percent of high school students reporting incidents, which is down 7 percent and 22 percent from 2019, respectively.

According to more current, preliminary data from PED's discipline dashboard, in the 2022-2023 school year, bullying or harassment on the basis of sex, race, color, national orgin, or disability comprised 53 percent of all hate crime flagged infractions in New Mexico public schools.

Cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is the use of digital communication to harass, intimidate, or threaten individuals, often through menacing messages. While it shares similarities with traditional bullying, cyberbullying has distinct characteristics that make it a pressing concern for parents and educators.

The Covid-19 pandemic's disruption of in-person schooling changed the dynamics of bullying experienced by students.

Unlike traditional bullying, where victims typically know their bully, cyberbullies can remain anonymous online, leading to more severe and sustained harassment. Public exposure is also a significant aspect that distinguishes cyberbullying from traditional bullying. While traditional bullying is typically confined to those directly involved, cyberbullying can be witnessed by a vast online audience, subjecting victims to public ridicule and humiliation. Detecting cyberbullying can be a significant challenge for parents, teachers, and administrators, as they may not have visibility into students' online interactions. Unless someone reports it, the bullying may go undetected and unaddressed. Cyberbullying is as harmful as traditional bullying, with potential for even greater severity and long-term consequences.

According to national data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), among lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, 27 percent of students reported cyberbullying, a significantly larger share than peers identifying as heterosexual (14 percent). The YRBSS does not ask students about their gender identity, so the impact of bullying on transgender students is not specifically quantified in this data.

According to data from the New Mexico Children's Cabinet, cyber- or electronic bullying via texting or social media significantly increased among middle school students, with 27 percent reporting incidents in 2021, a 37 percent increase from 2019. In contrast, electronic bullying among high school students decreased to 13 percent, a 6 percent drop from 2019. Despite overall bullying rates remaining stable, concerns have grown, with high school students skipping school due to safety concerns more than doubling from 2013 to 2021.

Mental Health

Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing and is an important component of overall health and wellness. Education, overall health, and wellness are interrelated. According to the CDC, children who are mentally healthy have improved quality of life, can function well at home, in school, and in their communities; and are better able to cope with challenges.
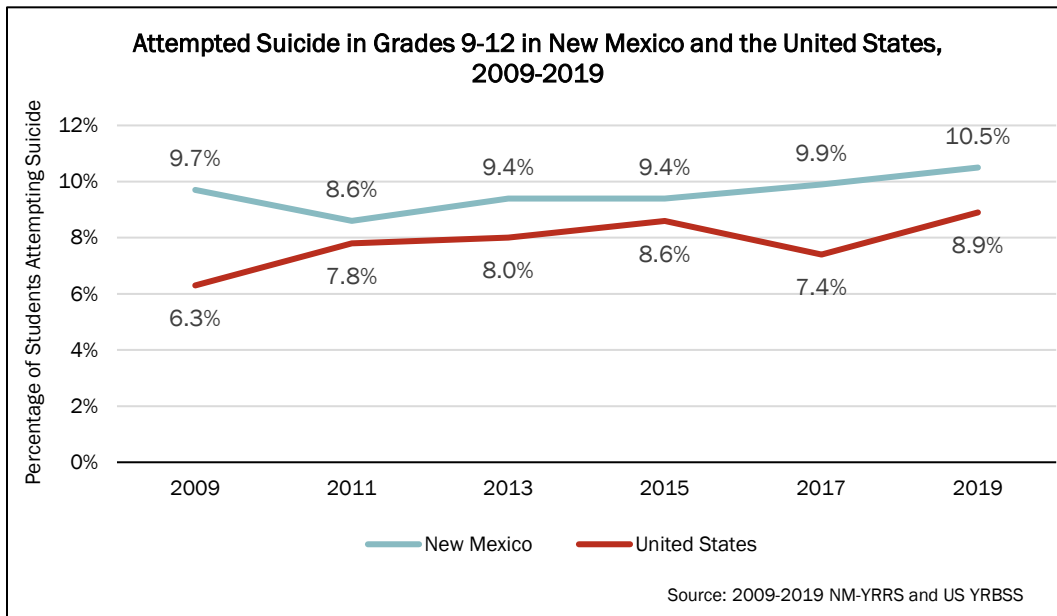
The majority of the behavioral health workforce in New Mexico schools is comprised of school counselors, followed by social workers. According to the most recent data available from a 2020 survey of behavioral health services offered within schools, the ratio of students to school counselors, psychologists, and social workers in New Mexico are significantly higher than nationally recommended ratios.

Social Emotional Learning. Research suggests schools should create positive school climates that center strong relationships and integrate SEL. The Social Emotional Learning Alliance for the United States defines SEL as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain a range of supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) further defines these skills, which CASEL calls the five core SEL competencies, as: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. Educational environments that recognize students' cultural assets and foster social and emotional wellbeing by developing these core competencies lead not only to improved school culture, but also improved academics.

Youth Suicide. Data shows youth suicide and suicidal behavior is increasing in New Mexico and across the United States. New Mexico uses the New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (NM YRRS) to assess the health risk behaviors and resiliency of New Mexico secondary students through a survey administered to a selection of schools in each school district in the fall of even numbered years. NM YRRS is part of the national CDC Youth Risk and Behavior Surveillance system (U.S. YRBS), allowing for comparisons between New Mexico and national data.

As illustrated by the graph below, youth suicide attempts in New Mexico have consistently outpaced the nation, even before the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2019, New Mexico's suicide attempt rate among students in grades nine through 12 was 10.5 percent, compared to the national rate of 8.9 percent.

Attempted Suicide in Grades 9-12 in New Mexico and the United States, 2009-2019

Source: 2009-2019 NM-YRRS and US YRBSS

The New Mexico Department of Health (DOH)—which administers NM YRRS—reports that in 2019, suicide was the leading cause of death for youth aged 13-17 in New Mexico. In DOH's most recent State of Mental Health in New Mexico 2022 report, which provides detailed information about the mental health of New Mexico residents, the department notes suicide attempts are associated with depression and other mental health issues.

Strategic Planning for Youth Suicide Prevention in School Settings. Suicide is preventable. As detailed in a May 2024 LESC staff brief on Youth Suicide Prevention, adults working with youth in school settings, families, and peers can play a critical role in identifying and supporting youth at risk for suicide.

According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, school-based suicide prevention efforts should begin with a strategic planning effort that assesses the local context and available resources. Strategic planning can help schools determine which student populations to focus on, identify programs and policies that will be effective in preventing suicide, and prioritize efforts to achieve maximum impact. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center recommends the following six steps for strategic planning for youth suicide prevention:

> The prevalence of suicide and suicide-related behaviors can be reduced through comprehensive suicide prevention programs and policies, providing services to high risk youth, and supporting youth who have lost a loved one.

1. Describe the problem and its context.
2. Choose long-term goals.
3. Identify key risk factors and protective factors.
4. Select or develop interventions.
5. Plan the evaluation.
6. Implement, evaluate, and improve.

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In New Mexico, safe schools plans—which are discussed in depth later in this brief—must include recommended procedures for supporting potentially suicidal students as well as a referral network for suicide assessment and intervention; schools could, and likely should, choose to adopt a strategic planning approach to youth suicide prevention as part of school safety plan work.

Risk and Resilience. NM YRRS is a tool to assess the risk and behaviors and resiliency factors of New Mexico high school and middle school students. Topic areas for NM YRRS include risk behaviors related to suicide ideation and attempts, as mentioned previously in this brief, as well as alcohol and drug use, unintentional injury, violence, tobacco use, sexual activity, physical activity, and nutrition. Resiliency and protective factors measured by NM YRRS include relationships in the family, school, community, and with peers, and health status issues such as body weight and asthma.

DOH recently released new data from the 2021 NM YRRS, including a factsheet highlighting comparisons between New Mexico students and secondary students across the country. According to DOH, compared to high school students nationally, New Mexico high school students were more likely to skip school due to safety concerns, were more likely to experience frequent mental distress, and were more likely not to be physically active in the last seven days. The recently released data revealed some concerning trends in risk behaviors among students in New Mexico, including behaviors associated with mental health, suicidal behaviors, sexual violence, and obesity. For example, looking at data from 2011-2021 for New Mexico students in ninth through 12th grade:

- Sadness or hopelessness increased by 44 percent;
- Seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months increased by 18 percent;
- Skipping school because of safety concerns almost doubled; and
- Obesity increased by 49 percent.

Summary of 10-Year Trends in Selected Risk Behaviors in Grades 9-12 in New Mexico, 2011-2021
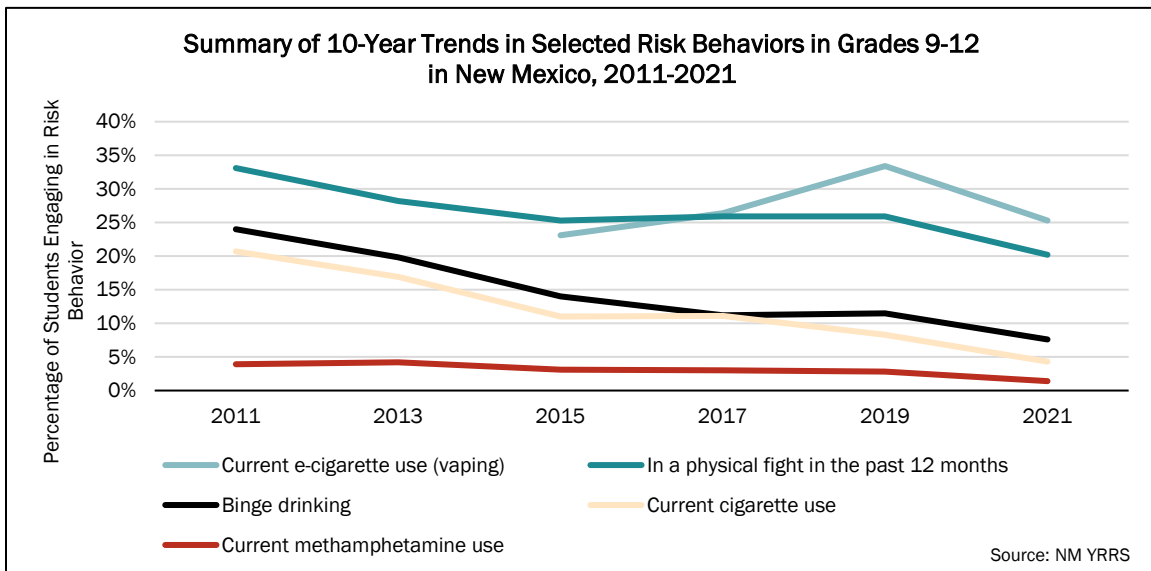
However, trends in other areas were encouraging. As illustrated by the graph above, several important risk factors, including violence and the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, decreased over the past 10 years.

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NM YRRS releases publicly available data at the county level for middle school and high school students; data can also be requested at the school district level.

Long- and Short-Term Care. Students with extreme mental health challenges may need support through residential treatment centers, either through short- or long-term care. Short-term care can last several days or months, depending on the circumstances and level of care that is needed, but it is ultimately designed to transition students back to their regular routine. Long-term care is provided over extended periods of time and includes a broad range of personal, social, and medical services and support and aims to reduce functional decline for students with, or at risk of, a significant loss of capacity (due to mental or physical illness or disability).

The New Mexico Human Services Department (HSD) recently announced New Mexico has been selected as one of ten states to receive enhanced federal Medicaid funding aimed at transforming behavioral health services, and will launch certified behavioral health clinics on January 1, 2025.

In New Mexico, school stakeholders have told LESC staff that there is a need for more short- and long-term care facilities, as well as staff, to support student needs such as mental health challenges, early intervention for drug abuse, and alcohol intervention. School staff have also noted there is no current requirement for short- and long-term care facilities to communicate with the public school in which the student is enrolled to maintain continuity of care. For example, it is important for counselors to know when a student is returning to school so they may initiate a reentry plan for students who were in residential care.

LESC staff will study the landscape of short- and long-term care facilities in New Mexico and identify solutions for increasing the number of long- and short-term care options in New Mexico for students with mental or behavioral health challenges as well as students with disabilities. LESC will hear a panel of experts discuss the current landscape and challenges with short- and long-term care facilities during the 2024 Interim.

Physical Safety

A systems-based approach to school safety necessitates preparation for instances in which preventative efforts are unsuccessful. Schools should be prepared to appropriately protect against threats using physical security measures, safety procedures, and emergency communication systems to detect and mitigate the impact of safety incidents. In New Mexico and nationwide, significant investments have been made to improve the physical infrastructure and emergency readiness of school facilities and staff to reduce risks associated with firearms, other weapons, and various harmful behaviors.

Firearms on School Grounds

Debates over school safety in the United States in the 21st century have repeatedly come on the heels of violent incidents involving firearms on school grounds, particularly school shootings. Exposure to these instances contributes significantly to students' and educators' perception of school safety and takes a heavy toll on the school community.

National Trends in Gun Violence in Schools. According to data from the K-12 School Shooting Database, school shooting incidents, victims, and deaths, have all risen since 2017. This database compiles instances in which a gun was fired, brandished with intent, or a bullet hit school property, regardless of the number of victims, dating back to 1966. In 2017,

59 incidents involving 71 victims and 21 deaths occurred nationwide. In 2023, those numbers increased to 348, 249, and 71 respectively, representing a nearly 500 percent increase in incidents since 2017.

The chart below plots incidents, victims, and deaths in U.S. school shootings since 1999 (the year of the Columbine High School massacre). Until 2017, the trends in both incidents and victims were relatively flat before spiking significantly in subsequent years. Deaths from school shootings have gradually increased since 1999, though at a slower rate than the other two categories.
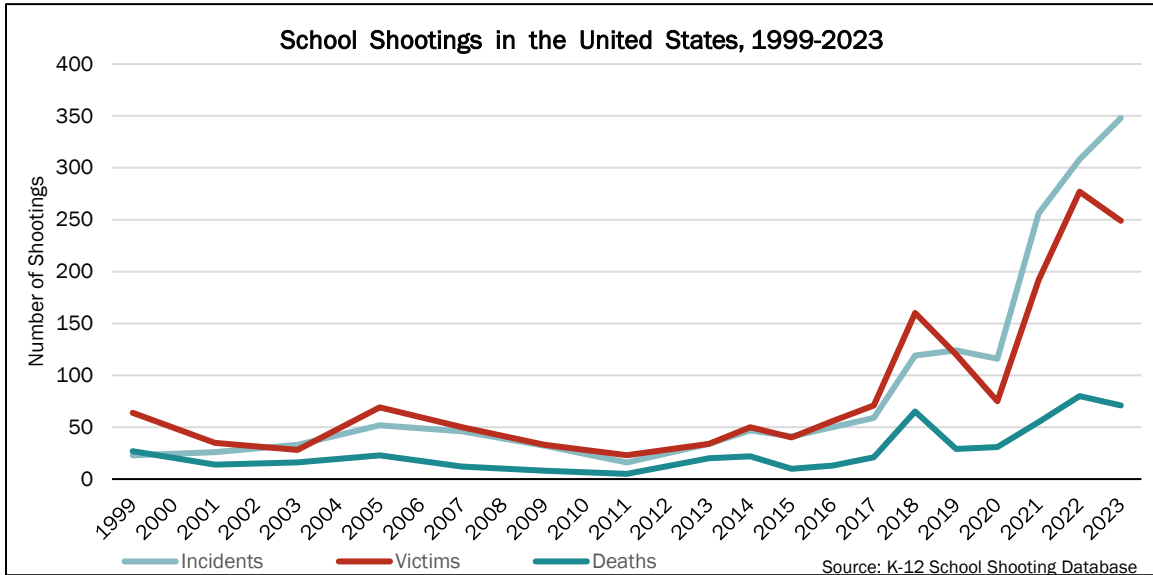
Though the prevalence of school shootings has spiked in recent years, national trends regarding firearms and other weapons being carried in schools are more encouraging. Data from the CDC's U.S. YRBS shows a slow but steady decline in the percentage of students reporting bringing a gun, knife, or club to their high school at least one day in the 30 days before the survey. From 2005 (the first year corresponding New Mexico data was available) to 2021, national survey responses showed a decrease in this percentage from 6.5 percent to 3.1.

The percentage in 2021 was a slight uptick from the final pre-pandemic number of 2.8 percent in 2019, but still reflects a longer-term downward trend in the reported percentage of student-brought weapons in high schools. The national percentage of students reporting being injured with a weapon on school property also declined slightly from 7.3 percent in 1993 to 6.6 percent in 2021.

New Mexico's trends followed national patterns overall, though New Mexico students were more likely than the national average to report bringing a weapon onto campus. In the 2021 New Mexico data, 4.2 percent of students reported bringing a weapon onto school property, a slight increase from four percent in 2019, but a decrease from the initial eight percent reported in 2005.

Guns and Other Weapons in New Mexico Schools. According to data from the K-12 School Shooting Database, there have been 25 shooting incidents impacting New Mexico schools since 1971, 19 of which occurred after 2013.

At the state level, LESC staff contacted both PED and the Department of Public Safety (DPS) to gather data on firearms found on school grounds. The response from DPS indicated that this data is not collected by their agency.

PED discipline dashboard data from the 2022-2023 school year reports 78 infractions involving firearms in New Mexico schools. In comparison, the 2021-2022 school year had 70 firearm infractions. In 2022-2023, the most common disciplinary response for infractions in this category was an out of school suspension (47 instances). In 10 cases, students were expelled, while five infractions resulted in arrest or referral to the justice system and another five had students placed in alternative settings by a hearing officer.

Some school districts internally track the prevalence of firearms on their campuses. Data obtained by LESC from the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) Police Department indicates 10 firearms were reported or seized on APS campuses in the 2021-2022 school year, 17 firearms were reported or seized in the 2022-2023 school year, and 15 have been found during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Impact of Gun Violence on School Communities. Survey results in recent years find high levels of concern from educators, parents, and students about the threat of a school shooting on their campus. A 2018 survey of teenage students from the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan think tank, found that 57 percent of respondents were either somewhat (32 percent) or very (25 percent) worried about the possibility of a shooting at their school. For teachers in 2023, 59 percent of those surveyed by Pew were either somewhat (41 percent), very (11 percent), or extremely (7 percent) worried about a shooting at their school.

Many parents are also concerned about the potential for school shootings, with a 2022 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center finding that 65 percent of surveyed parents were either somewhat (35 percent), very (12 percent), or extremely (18 percent) worried about a shooting impacting their children's school. In the 2023 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 1 in 4 teachers reported their campus had been locked down in response to firearm-related concerns in the last school year. Approximately 8 percent of respondents indicated that multiple gun-related lockdowns took place during the school year.

> Significant levels of concern about school shootings from students, families, and educators come at a moment when gun-related lockdowns in schools are becoming commonplace.

School Lockdowns

Lockdown procedures vary in definition, terminology, and practice from state to state and even by school district. In general, as outlined by guidance from the U.S. Department of Education's Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center, a school lockdown refers to an effort by a school to protect their internal community from a threat by closing off entry to school buildings and instructing students and staff to shelter in place.

Based on conversations between LESC staff, PED, DPS, and Poms & Associates, school lockdown data is not collected at the state level in New Mexico. To gather data on lockdown incidents at schools in New Mexico, LESC staff reached out to officials at APS, which collects regular data.

Shelter-in-Place Incidents by Calendar Year	
Albuquerque Public Schools	
Calendar Year	Shelter-in-Place Incidents
2021*	27
2022	64
2023	61
2024**	34
TOTAL	186
* Data from 2021 begins on July 27, 2021	
** Data from 2024 runs up to May 24, 2024	
Source: Albuquerque Public Schools Police Department	

According to the data provided by the APS Police Department, APS had a total of 186 active shelter-in-place incidents between July 27, 2021, and May 24, 2024. APS no longer uses "lockdown" terminology. "Shelter-in-place" incidents are defined as instances in which an event or action is taking place either on or off campus where there is no immediate threat to the school. In cases where there is an immediate threat, the district initiates an "out house protocol." The chart to the left breaks down shelter-in-place incidents in APS by year.

Capital Outlay for Safety Improvements

A significant level of state funding has been allocated for safety infrastructure in New Mexico public schools in recent years. In the following section, LESC staff has summarized these appropriations and their purposes, focusing on statewide initiatives and appropriations from fiscal year 2021 (FY21) through FY25.

School Panic Buttons. Between FY21 and FY25, approximately $5.6 million was allocated for school panic buttons from the general fund, the public school capital outlay fund (PSCOF), and the public education reform fund. The General Appropriations Act (House Bill 2) has included appropriations for school panic buttons each year since FY21.

School Bus Cameras. Approximately $1.4 million was allocated for school bus cameras from the general fund, the PSCOF, and severance tax bonds since FY21. School bus cameras are intended to be a deterrent to bullying and other disruptive and dangerous behavior. School bus camera footage can also be helpful in evaluating incidents after they occur. PED is the distributing agency for funds earmarked for school bus cameras. A single camera costs $2,500. Given that there are 2,000 school buses in the state and 560 have already had cameras installed, the remaining amount to equip every school bus would be about $3.6 million. According to PED, cameras are not equipped on new school buses unless an arrangement has been made between the district and the dealership or contractor. It is the responsibility of the district to decide when bus cameras are installed.

Safe School Summits. $400 thousand has been appropriated from the PSCOF ($200 thousand for FY24 and $200 thousand for FY25) School Safety Summits. The inaugural New Mexico State Safety Summit was held in November 2023 and was intended to provide LEAs with training, technical support, and assistance in developing and implementing effective emergency operation plans.

Laws 2023, Chapter 199 (House Bill 505). During the 2023 legislative session, $35 million dollars was allocated from the PSCOF to each school district for security infrastructure in public school buildings. This allocation was for FY24 and subsequent fiscal years. The Public School Facility Authority (PSFA) is the administrative agency for this allocation. Reported uses for the funds include items such as: access control systems, wearable crisis alert devices, consultation services for school safety plans, cameras, fencing, gates, vape detection technology, doors, door locks, security systems, security lighting, bulletproof glass treatments, gunshot detection technology, metal detectors, vehicle barriers, handheld radios, and school security communication systems.

School Security Awards. In response to the fatal shooting at Aztec High School in 2017, $10 million was set aside annually from FY19 to FY22 for New Mexico public schools to use for security purposes. Between 2018 and 2022, PSFA awarded $24.3 million to school districts across the state through the school security award program. However, the demand for this program was low, with requested funds falling below the $10 million per year threshold.

The low utilization of these funds is believed to be due to the strenuous Public School Capital Outlay Council (PSCOC) application and awards process. Additionally, awards were based on the local and state match formula. Despite the low demand for the program, school districts have continued to request more accessible and flexible funding for security projects. Distributed funds were used for items such as: fencing, gates, vehicle barriers, site access control, security lighting, emergency communication systems, window coverings and tint, impact resistant glass treatments, office space for counselors and SROs, security cameras, handheld radios, gunshot detection systems, and soft project-related costs.

Adequacy Standards. The statewide adequacy standards require minimal physical security elements of public schools. The topic of security is briefly discussed in two sections of the New Mexico Administrative Code (NMAC). The general requirements section includes two safety-related items that public school buildings must have in working order: a two-way internal communication system and a security system (NMAC 6.27.3.8.B), Within the school site section, physical requirements are limited to "safe and secure site fencing or other barriers with accommodations for safe passage through openings" (NMAC 6.27.30.10.D). These physical barriers are intended to provide protection from traffic hazards, railroad tracks, steep slopes, animal nuisance, and to discourage unauthorized access to the campus. New Mexico statute states that the PSCOC, in consultation with the Public School Capital Outlay Oversight Task Force (PSCOOTF) and other experts, "shall regularly review and update statewide adequacy standards applicable to all school districts" (NMSA 22-24-5.C).

> The statewide adequacy standards require all schools have a two-way internal communication system, a security system, and safe and secure site fencing.

Additional Funds. As a general practice, schools receive additional capital outlay through "junior bill" or direct capital outlay appropriations. Historically, these appropriations have included funding for items such as security cameras, fencing, security systems, and other safety and security enhancements. Of the $46.5 million appropriated in Laws 2024, Chapter 66 (Senate Bill 275), $7 million was authorized for projects including safety or security related upgrades in public schools.

Capital Outlay for Safety Improvements						
Fiscal Years 2021-2025						
(in dollars)						
Appropriations	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	TOTAL
School Bus Cameras	252,400	180,000	132,500	315,000	547,500	1,427,400
School Panic Buttons	1,595,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000	5,595,000
School Safety Summits				200,000	200,000	400,000
Security SB9 Distribution (HB505)					35,000,000	35,000,000
					Source: LESC Annual Reports 2021 - 2024	

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Safe Schools Plans

The school district wellness policy (NMAC 6.12.6) requires all New Mexico public schools have a safe schools plan (SSP) in place for each school building. An SSP is a document that is "focused on supporting healthy and safe learning environments," and must be submitted to PED every three years for approval. The plan must include the four following components at a minimum:

1. An introduction;
2. School policies and procedures;
3. Prevention measures; and
4. A school emergency operation plan (EOP).

PED provides school districts with guidance and support in creating SSPs. The services that PED offers include but are not limited to providing school districts with an SSP requirement rubric, SSP templates, a list of available training providers, and contact information for other related resources.

Utilization and Enforcement of SSPs. LESC staff spoke with the safe schools program coordinator at PED to discuss how SSPs are used and how the requirement for school districts to have an SSP in place for every school building is enforced. PED's oversight of schools' compliance with the SSP requirement relies on schools self-reporting. SSPs are usually exempt from Inspection of Public Records Act (IPRA) requests based on the sensitive information contained in these documents.

PED's Safe and Healthy Schools Bureau does follow up with schools to ensure compliance with SSP requirements, but there are limited enforcement measures available to PED. According to PED, no data is being collected on the documentation or analysis performed other than which districts and schools are compliant in submitting an SSP and verification that basic information is included in the plan. Currently, PED sends non-compliance letters to schools that have not submitted an updated SSP.

The requirement for schools to have an SSP in place is not solely an accountability measure. Instead, this requirement is also a mechanism to support school officials in gathering and considering what threats may be present at a specific school and for leadership to establish strategies to address or mitigate those threats. The SSP framework serves as a baseline for subjects that should be focused on and a guide for school leadership to use in fostering a healthy and safe environment for students and staff.

Panic Buttons and Incident Reporting Methods

Panic buttons are a common technology that aids school officials in effectively and swiftly communicating with one another and emergency services. The ease of use and the event information that Panic Button systems provide can help achieve a timely and effective response from emergency service providers.

During the 2020 legislative session, funding was allocated to provide school panic button communication systems to every New Mexico public school district and 911 Communication Centers at no cost. The PSCOC administered and disbursed school panic button funds until 2023, when this responsibility was transferred to PED.

[A joint study from the FBI and Texas State University](#) analyzed 63 active shooter incidents from 2000-2013, finding that 44 (69.8 percent) ended in five minutes or less, with 23 ending in two minutes or less. Even when law enforcement responded quickly, staff and students still had to make crucial survival decisions. Traditionally, a victim calls 911, reports the incident to the dispatcher, and the dispatcher then alerts law enforcement and first responders.

The RAVE Panic Button system, implemented in many public schools across New Mexico, offers a good example of school emergency communication systems. This app-based product enables dispatchers to simultaneously deploy multiple resources, access school layouts, and pinpoint the location of reporters and active assailants.
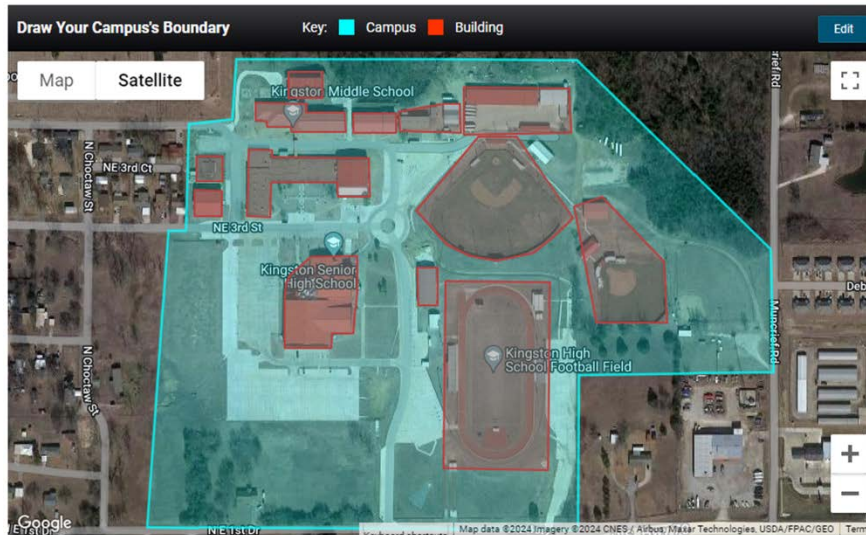
Source: RAVE

School safety communication systems also provide essential location data to law enforcement using GPS-based "geofencing" technology, offering a map of the campus and incident location, as shown in the example above. Staff and administration receive incident alerts via text message, and those with the app can access geofencing and location visuals. Beyond active assailant events, this system is useful for medical emergencies, fires, severe weather, natural disasters, and other situations requiring first responders.

The RAVE Panic Button software was chosen by staff for illustrative purposes because it is the most widely used school safety communication system in New Mexico public schools. As of May 2024, 570 of the over 800 schools in the state are using the software according to information provided by RAVE Mobile Safety. 244 schools reported that they are using other systems available on the market, and the remaining 83 schools are reported to have no system in place.

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A Look Ahead

No single policy, particularly within a realm as multi-faceted and complex as school safety, can cure every ailment in a system. In the wake of school tragedies, there is often a rush to "do something" to safeguard students and ensure that their place of learning offers an escape from the dangers of the broader world. This well-intentioned urge frequently manifests in the installation of bolstered visible physical security measures or the creation of stricter disciplinary policies.

Decision makers should embrace a holistic approach to student safety that incorporates both longer-term preventative efforts and physical security measures aimed at mitigating the impact of incidents.

Concrete protection and mitigation efforts are an important piece of the overall school safety puzzle, but policymakers and school officials must exercise caution in selecting which measures to implement so they do not end up undermining school safety rather than improving it.

While eliminating all threats to schools is impossible, there are concrete steps educational leaders can and should take to create secure, inclusive, and supportive environments that promote student safety and success.

In the second installment of LESC's school safety report in November 2024, staff will use lessons learned from this landscape analysis and broader research to provide policy and budgetary recommendations to lawmakers to ensure New Mexico schools have necessary state support to improve school safety.