

**California Stronger
Connections Technical
Assistance Center Strategies**

Strategy 1:
**Keep School Climate at
the Forefront**

Strategy 2:
Build a Culture of Communication

Strategy 3:
**Ensure Access to Behavioral
Health Supports**

Strategy 4:
**Use Restorative and Trauma-
Informed Practices to Support
Students with Unmet Needs**

Strategy 5:
**Leverage Out-of-School and
Youth-Driven Programs**

Building Safer Schools Through Connection, Support, and Belonging

Ashley Boal & Shannon McCullough

When the topic of school safety arises, strategies such as conducting active shooter drills; access control measures like locking doors and monitoring visitors; and assets such as surveillance systems, metal detectors, and school resource officers are often top of mind. These physical security strategies and resources may constitute one element of a district's or school's safety plan, but they do not address the root causes of safety issues, and many of the strategies tend to focus on responding to crises rather than preventing them. **To effectively cultivate safety, schools must draw on a whole person approach that supports the physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional development of students in order to create environments in which students feel connected and able to seek help when they need it.**¹ This guide highlights five evidence-based strategies—all grounded in a whole person framework—that districts and schools can enact to support school safety.

Strategy 1: Keep School Climate at the Forefront

A positive school climate is one of the most foundational elements of effective school safety because it can shape the behavior and overall well-being of both students and adults.² When students feel welcome, valued, and connected to their school community, they are less likely to engage in risky or violent behavior.³ Supportive relationships—between students and adults and among peers—play a critical role in preventing

bullying and physical violence. At the same time, positive relationships also create an environment in which students feel comfortable sharing concerns before they escalate. Importantly, approaches that rely on heavy policing or surveillance can erode these relationships and trust, ultimately weakening both school climate and students' sense of safety.

Actions

- Engage students in reviewing school climate data to help make meaning of the results and provide suggestions for next steps.
- Provide school staff with professional development focused on creating inclusive, supportive classroom environments and building positive relationships with students.
- Incorporate evidence-based relationship-building strategies, such as advisory periods and mentoring programs, that help ensure all students have a trusted adult in the school.

Example:

Patterson Joint Unified School District in California's Central Valley provides a strong example of how data-driven, inclusive approaches to school climate can support school safety. The district uses school climate survey data to identify strengths and needs related to student connectedness, trust, and well-being, which are factors that are closely linked to the prevention of violence. By engaging students in reviewing data, the district ensures that efforts are grounded in the experiences of the school community and responsive to emerging concerns. This collaborative approach helps strengthen relationships, increase students' willingness to share concerns, and address issues before they escalate.⁴

Strategy 2: Build a Culture of Communication

Despite students being the best source of information about their friends and classmates, many do not report concerns when peers may be a threat to themselves or others.⁵ The reason for this is clear—students do not report concerns when they do not know how to make a report, they are uncertain about whether the threat is substantial enough to intervene, or they are unsure whether adults will effectively respond. Prevention relies on a strong culture of communication in which students know what concerns to report, know how to report those concerns, and feel confident that

adults will take them seriously and address their concerns in a discreet and supportive way.⁶ For example, one study found nearly 14 percent fewer violent incidents at schools with an anonymous reporting system compared to schools without one.⁷ This culture of communication extends beyond the school building because some students may feel most comfortable disclosing concerns to family members, making it imperative that schools educate and communicate with families to ensure consistent messaging about what should be reported and how to make reports.

Actions

- Ensure there are regular and meaningful opportunities for students to provide input and contribute to decisions about their school to build a culture that recognizes student voice as a powerful and important part of how the school functions.
- Develop reporting systems, such as anonymous tip lines or online forms, and ensure students and families know how to use them.
- Clearly communicate how safety reports are handled, highlighting the importance of confidentiality and the goal of providing help rather than punishment.
- Leverage peer groups to provide education about when and how to report safety concerns because peer-to-peer sharing can be a powerful tool for normalizing and destigmatizing reporting.

Example:

Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD) began implementing Say Something, an anonymous reporting system developed by the Sandy Hook Promise, during the 2023–24 school year. To introduce the new reporting system, students and staff across the district received training via videos and discussion time. Training and efforts to build a culture of communication have continued annually to ensure that both students and staff are able to recognize warning signs; take warning signs seriously; and understand how to use the Say Something telephone hotline, mobile app, and website. The district's investment in a reporting system and emphasis on clear communication about identifying and reporting threats paid off in the fall of 2025 when a tip flagging troubling social media posts led to the detainment of a student and intervention to ensure the potential threat did not escalate.⁸

Strategy 3: Ensure Access to Behavioral Health Supports

Addressing student behavioral health needs is a key strategy for preventing school violence.⁹ Students at risk of committing violence upon themselves or others often exhibit observable warning signs, and, with the right supports in place, schools can intervene to address issues before students turn to violence.¹⁰ Strategies

such as having multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that align students with appropriate services based on needs, conducting universal screenings to identify students who need support, and making behavioral health supports available on campus can help ensure that students get the support they need when they need it.¹¹

Actions

- Build a strong continuum of behavioral health supports to ensure that the school behavioral health system is equipped to support and triage students with varied needs. These should include Tier 1 supports like universal mental health literacy and awareness of available resources, Tier 2 supports like short-term on-campus counseling to address an emergent need, and Tier 3 supports like referrals to community organizations that can provide more intensive care.
- Increase the number of school-based mental health professionals, such as counselors and social workers, to provide support when and where it is needed.
- Create clear guidelines for referrals and follow-ups when connecting students to behavioral health services.
- Implement universal behavioral health screenings to proactively identify students who may need additional support.

Example:

Humboldt County represents a strong example of how collaboration across systems can expand access to behavioral health supports for students. The county has established partnerships between its behavioral health department, the county office of education, school districts, and community-based organizations. Through these partnerships, Humboldt County has built a coordinated system that helps connect students to a clear continuum of mental health services through approaches like integrating behavioral health supports within MTSS and leveraging funding streams to increase access to care. By creating this alignment, Humboldt County has helped reduce gaps in care and create a more proactive, preventative approach to increasing school safety.¹²

Strategy 4: Use Restorative and Trauma-Informed Practices to Support Students with Unmet Needs

According to the National Center for School Safety, restorative practices, including nonexclusionary discipline, and trauma-informed practices are the only two school safety strategies with a clear and consistent evidence base to support the prevention of, response to, and recovery from school-based violence.¹³ These approaches emphasize the importance of retaining and building

connections with students at risk for violence rather than further marginalizing or isolating them from the school community.¹⁴ Approaches that focus on meeting students where they are with empathy and consistency to build trust, uncover root causes behind behaviors, support the development of healthy coping strategies, and repair harm are vital.¹⁵

Actions

- Provide regular professional development for school staff on restorative and trauma-informed practices.
- Review and revise exclusionary discipline practices to identify opportunities to replace these practices with restorative approaches, such as restorative circles or mediation.
- Partner with behavioral health professionals to help support students experiencing trauma.

Example:

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has had success in using trauma-informed practices to support students in crisis. The district has trained educators and school staff to recognize and respond to the impacts of trauma, which has equipped them with strategies for de-escalating, providing emotional support, and connecting students with appropriate services. Through a partnership with the District Attorney's Office, SDUSD has also implemented a Handle with Care program, which allows law enforcement to confidentially notify schools when a student has experienced a traumatic event outside of school, such as a family crisis or law enforcement incident. This enables educators to respond with awareness and support rather than punitive discipline.¹⁶

Strategy 5: Leverage Out-of-School and Youth-Driven Programs

Out-of-school time can be a key—but often overlooked—component of school safety. The time students spend outside the school day may involve less supervision and structure, which can increase the potential for isolation or engagement in spaces that reinforce negative or violent behaviors.¹⁷ High-quality out-of-school- and youth-focused programs can shift

this from a time of disconnection to a time of meaningful engagement by providing students with opportunities to participate in activities they enjoy and build positive relationships. Key to the effectiveness of these programs is responsiveness to youths' interests and voices because programs that reflect what young people value are more likely to attract and sustain participation.

Actions

- Expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs to help provide students with structured, predictable environments.
- Create partnerships with community organizations to provide additional programming (e.g., mentoring, arts) not available during the school day.
- Ensure programs provide students with access to trusted adults who can encourage the development of strong, positive relationships.

Example:

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Beyond the Bell program provides free before school, after school, summer, and intersession programs that offer students safe, supervised environments during high-risk hours outside the regular school day. Through a mix of academic support, enrichment activities (such as arts, STEM, and sports), and opportunities for social-emotional development, the program promotes positive youth development and engagement. By extending learning beyond the school day in structured, engaging spaces, LAUSD is helping reduce risks associated with unsupervised time and strengthen protective factors that contribute to school safety.¹⁸

To prevent and address school safety incidents, the whole child must be kept at the forefront. Approaches that emphasize building a positive school climate, encouraging a culture of communication, providing robust behavioral health supports, using restorative practices, and making use of youth-driven out-of-school-time programming provide an essential foundation for school safety. By strengthening connection, trust, and belonging, districts can build safer school communities in which students are supported and willing to seek help when it matters most.

Acknowledgments

This resource was developed by the California Stronger Connections Technical Assistance Center (SCTAC), an initiative of the California Department of Education. We would like to thank Hilva Chan at the California Department of Education and Rebeca Cerna at WestEd for their essential feedback. We would also like to thank Dr. Karrie Sequeira at the California Department of Education for their support.

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