# Policies and Practices Supporting Student-Centered Learning in Rhode Island:
# School Climate

School climate is the character and quality of life within a school building and is defined by several indicators including the relationships among students, teachers, families, and the broader community; safety; facilities; the availability of school-based health supports; discipline policies; and academic outcomes. A positive school climate promotes social, mental, emotional, behavioral, and learning success while also ensuring physical and social safety.[1,2]

A positive school climate is an essential element of an effective learning environment and can improve student and teacher attendance, student motivation to learn, academic achievement, and graduation rates.[3,4,5] Creating and implementing racially aware policies and practices can improve school climates and increase equity.

## Policies Designed to Support School Climate

### Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

The federal *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* recognizes the strong relationship between positive school climate, student learning, and academic success and requires states to include data related to school climate and safety in annual school report cards. Rhode Island's state report card includes data on student suspensions, school-related arrests, and referrals to law enforcement.[6,7]

### Rhode Island Law Restricting Suspensions

In 2016, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law that restricts the use of out-of-school suspensions to situations when a child's behavior poses a demonstrable threat that cannot be dealt with by other means and requires school districts to identify any racial, ethnic, or special education disparities and to develop a plan to reduce such disparities.[8]

### Rhode Island's Basic Education Plan requires each school district to:

- Create a climate of safety, security, and belonging for all students and adults.[9]
- Involve students and staff in a participatory process to periodically assess the school climate and to adopt or develop strategies to improve conditions.[10]
- Administer fair disciplinary actions for all students.[11]

## Mental and Behavioral Health

In the United States, nearly 35 million children have experienced at least one event that could lead to childhood trauma and about 72% of all children will have experienced at least one traumatic event, such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or experiencing the loss of a loved one, before the age of 18. In Rhode Island, one in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 has a diagnosable mental health problem; one in 10 (9.8%) has a significant functional impairment. In the U.S., students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for mental health than community mental health centers. This is especially true in school districts in areas with a high concentration of poverty.[12,13]

**Historical racism in government policies** has resulted in Black and Native American children being seven times more likely and Latino children nearly five times more likely to live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty than White children, to have limited access to medical care, and to have increased exposure to environmental hazards, violence and negative interactions with law enforcement.[14,15] **Poverty, racism, and discrimination are linked to toxic stress, which adversely alters early brain development that serves as the basis for learning, behavior, and health later in life.**[16,17]

Feelings of safety and connection with school are the most important school climate factors for promoting and protecting student mental and emotional well-being.[18] School-based mental health professionals have an important role to play in creating and sustaining positive school climates and can improve health outcomes, school safety, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement and career preparation, and lower rates of suspension and other disciplinary incidents.[19] The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students per school counselor.[20] The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 500 to 700 students per school psychologist.[21] The School Social Work Association of America recommends a ratio of 250 students to one social worker.[22]
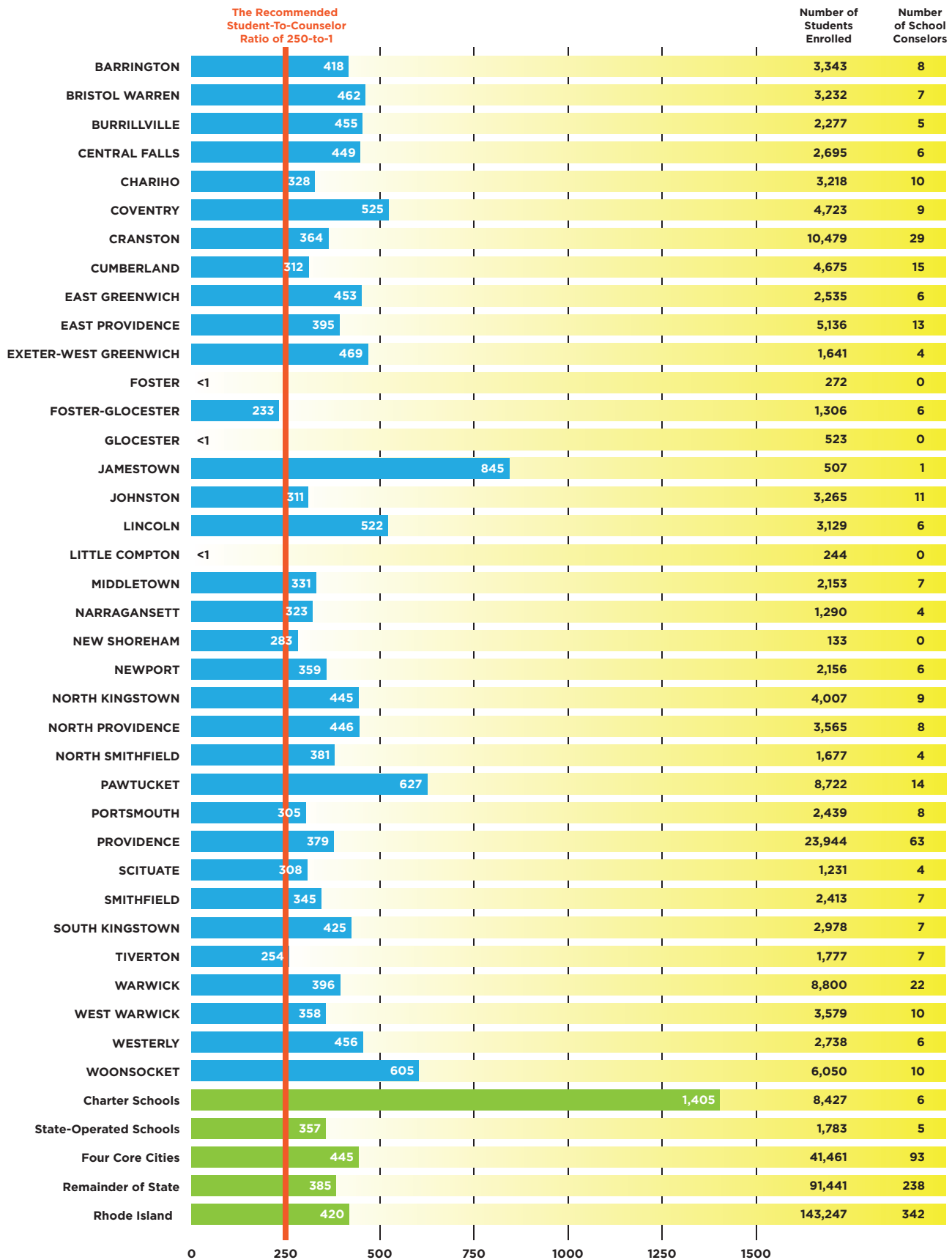
**In Rhode Island, during the 2015-2016 school year, there were 392 students for every school counselor, 841 students for every school psychologist, and 685 students for every school social worker, far above the recommended ratios.**[23]

## School Climate Transformation Project

In 2018, the Rhode Island Department of Education was awarded $2.5 million to create the School Climate Transformation Project, an initiative designed to help schools and districts expand and connect programs that address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students and to utilize a holistic approach to address equity and educational disparities. Participating districts and schools include Coventry, East Greenwich, East Providence, Exeter-West Greenwich, Johnston, Newport, Warwick, Westerly, and the Paul Cuffee Charter School.[24]

# Rhode Island Student-to-School Counselor Ratio, 2018-2019 School Year

| District | Ratio | Number of Students Enrolled | Number of School Conselors |
|---|---|---|---|
| BARRINGTON | 418 | 3,343 | 8 |
| BRISTOL WARREN | 462 | 3,232 | 7 |
| BURRILLVILLE | 455 | 2,277 | 5 |
| CENTRAL FALLS | 449 | 2,695 | 6 |
| CHARIHO | 328 | 3,218 | 10 |
| COVENTRY | 525 | 4,723 | 9 |
| CRANSTON | 364 | 10,479 | 29 |
| CUMBERLAND | 312 | 4,675 | 15 |
| EAST GREENWICH | 453 | 2,535 | 6 |
| EAST PROVIDENCE | 395 | 5,136 | 13 |
| EXETER-WEST GREENWICH | 469 | 1,641 | 4 |
| FOSTER | <1 | 272 | 0 |
| FOSTER-GLOCESTER | 233 | 1,306 | 6 |
| GLOCESTER | <1 | 523 | 0 |
| JAMESTOWN | 845 | 507 | 1 |
| JOHNSTON | 311 | 3,265 | 11 |
| LINCOLN | 522 | 3,129 | 6 |
| LITTLE COMPTON | <1 | 244 | 0 |
| MIDDLETOWN | 331 | 2,153 | 7 |
| NARRAGANSETT | 323 | 1,290 | 4 |
| NEW SHOREHAM | 283 | 133 | 0 |
| NEWPORT | 359 | 2,156 | 6 |
| NORTH KINGSTOWN | 445 | 4,007 | 9 |
| NORTH PROVIDENCE | 446 | 3,565 | 8 |
| NORTH SMITHFIELD | 381 | 1,677 | 4 |
| PAWTUCKET | 627 | 8,722 | 14 |
| PORTSMOUTH | 305 | 2,439 | 8 |
| PROVIDENCE | 379 | 23,944 | 63 |
| SCITUATE | 308 | 1,231 | 4 |
| SMITHFIELD | 345 | 2,413 | 7 |
| SOUTH KINGSTOWN | 425 | 2,978 | 7 |
| TIVERTON | 254 | 1,777 | 7 |
| WARWICK | 396 | 8,800 | 22 |
| WEST WARWICK | 358 | 3,579 | 10 |
| WESTERLY | 456 | 2,738 | 6 |
| WOONSOCKET | 605 | 6,050 | 10 |
| Charter Schools | 1,405 | 8,427 | 6 |
| State-Operated Schools | 357 | 1,783 | 5 |
| Four Core Cities | 445 | 41,461 | 93 |
| Remainder of State | 385 | 91,441 | 238 |
| Rhode Island | 420 | 143,247 | 342 |

0    250    500    750    1000    1250    1500

Sources: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, State Nonfiscal Public Elementary/Secondary Education Survey, 2018-2019. Rhode Island Department of Education, Public school enrollment in pre-school through grade 12 as of October 1, 2018. Note: Foster, Glocester, Jamestown, Little Compton, and several charter schools do not serve secondary school students.

## Measures of School Climate

### SurveyWorks

Students are more successful when they have a trusting relationship with at least one adult in school. When students have a sense of belonging, they have higher academic achievement, better attendance, and increased mental and emotional well-being.[25,26] *SurveyWorks* is an annual survey administered to Rhode Island public school students and includes several measures of school climate. Currently, *SurveyWorks* data is not included in the state's accountability system.

### The Rhode Island 2020 *SurveyWorks* Results:

- Forty-one percent of Rhode Island students in grades six through 12 report positive perceptions of school climate, down from 45% in 2017. Compared to the national dataset, Rhode Island scores near the 10th percentile on this topic.

- Between 2018 and 2020, the positive perception of school belonging for students in grades six through 12 declined from 34% to 32%.

- Sixty percent of Rhode Island students in grades six through 12 report that stress interfered with their ability to participate in school.

- Forty-nine percent of Rhode Island students in grades six through 12 report remaining calm, even if someone is bothering them or saying something bad.

- Forty-five percent of females and 46% of males in grades six through 12 report favorable student-teacher relationships compared to 31% of gender non-conforming students.

- In Rhode Island, 54% of White, 52% of Asian, 49% of Hispanic/Latino, 44% of Black, 44% of Multiracial students, and 40% of Native American students in grades six through 12 responded favorably on questions about the perception of fairness of school rules.

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, *SurveyWorks*, Student Survey, Grades 6-12, 2020. Retrieved June 29, 2020, from ride.ri.gov

### Survey Results Through An Equity Lens

In the U.S., students of color are more likely to report being victims of unfair treatment because of their race compared to White students. Discrimination or expecting future discrimination from teachers is associated with increased stress, decreased engagement in school, and negative academic outcomes. Stress caused by discrimination or stereotype threat, a feeling of apprehension about confirming negative stereotypes, impacts attention, memory, and executive functioning, increases anxiety, anger and depression among students of color, and is connected to disparities in academic outcomes.[27,28,29]



Photo: change.org

## Suspensions

Effective school disciplinary practices promote a safe and respectful school climate, support learning, and address the causes of student misbehavior. **Suspension usually does not deter students from exhibiting negative behaviors and may reinforce negative behavior patterns.** Suspended students are more likely than their peers to experience academic failure, juvenile justice system involvement, disengagement from school, isolation from teachers and peers, and dropping out of school. Being suspended even once in ninth grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out.[30,31]



"I was suspended in second grade for stealing candy from the principal's office."

*- Rhode Island High School Student*

### Out-of-School Suspensions by Infraction, Rhode Island, 2018-2019

| BY TYPE OF INFRACTION* | # | % |
|---|---|---|
| Fighting | 2,072 | 21% |
| Insubordination/Disrespect | 1,820 | 18% |
| Assault of Student or Teacher | 1,422 | 14% |
| Disorderly Conduct | 1,415 | 14% |
| Harassment/Intimidation/Threat | 1,054 | 11% |
| Alcohol/Drug/Tobacco Offenses | 993 | 10% |
| Obscene/Abusive Language | 539 | 5% |
| Arson/Larceny/Robbery/Vandalism | 231 | 2% |
| Weapon Possession | 178 | 2% |
| Other Offenses | 154 | 2% |
| Electronic Devices/Technology | 103 | 1% |
| Attendance Offenses | 0 | 0% |
| *Total* | *9,981* | |

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year.

*\*Harassment offenses include hazing and hate crimes. Assault offenses include sexual assault.*

### Bias in School Discipline by Special Education Status and Race/Ethnicity, Rhode Island, 2018-2019

| | % OF STUDENTS ENROLLED | % OF SUSPENSIONS |
|---|---|---|
| Students With Disabilities | 15% | 31% |
| White Students | 57% | 44% |
| Hispanic Students | 26% | 34% |
| Black Students | 9% | 12% |
| Asian Students | 3% | 2% |
| Native American Students | 1% | 2% |

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year. % suspensions includes in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Detailed data by district is available at www.ride.ri.gov

■ In Rhode Island, during the 2018-2019 school year, differently-abled students/students with disabilities were suspended disproportionately. Students with disabilities represent 15% of the student population but represented 31% of suspensions. Students of color were also suspended disproportionately. Black students represent 9% of the student population but represented 12% of suspensions. Hispanic students represent 26% of the student population but represented 34% of suspensions.[32]

■ Since 2016, when the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law that restricts the use of out-of-school suspensions to situations when a child's behavior poses a demonstrable threat, the number of out-of-school suspensions has decreased by less than one percent.[33,34]

■ Despite this law, in Rhode Island, during the 2018-2019 school year, more than half of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent offenses, such as insubordination/disrespect, disorderly conduct, obscene/abusive language, alcohol/drug/tobacco offenses, and electronic devices/technology offenses.[35]

■ Of all disciplinary actions in Rhode Island during the 2018-2019 school year, 15% (1,515) involved elementary school students (kindergarten-5th grade), 42% (4,193) involved middle school students (6th-8th grades), and 43% (4,273) involved high school students (9th-12th grades). For elementary school students, 74% of disciplinary actions were out-of-school suspensions. Kindergarteners received 133 disciplinary actions, including 110 out-of-school suspensions.[36]

## Law Enforcement

In the U.S., in the 2017-2018 school year, 65% of middle schools and 75% of high schools had a School Resource Officer (SRO), while another 15% of schools had other forms of law enforcement present including parole, probation, truancy, security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers.[37] SROs can serve many functions in schools including enforcement of student discipline. Nationally, 39% of SROs report having received training in child trauma, 37% report having training on the teen brain, and 25% report having no experience with youth before working in schools. Research suggests the presence of law enforcement worsens school climates, increases disciplinary actions, and disproportionately impacts the academic outcomes of students of color.[38,39,40]

Rhode Island relies on federally generated data to report school-related arrests and student referrals to law enforcement. This data is collected in inconsistent time intervals by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights.[41] In Rhode Island, during the 2015-2016 school year, Black students represented 8% of the student population but represented 23% of students referred to law enforcement and 23% of students with school-related arrests; Hispanic students represented 24% of the student population but represented 47% of students referred to law enforcement and 36% of students with school-related arrests. In comparison, White students represented 60% of students enrolled but represented only 18% of students referred to law enforcement and 25% of students with school-related arrests. Students with Individual Education Plans represented 15% of the student population but represented 22% of students referred to law enforcement and 29% of students with school-related arrests.[42]

"It's like schools are afraid of Hispanic youth."

*- Member, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Student-Center Learning Leadership Table*

Student arrest and juvenile detention increases a student's likelihood of future arrests, decreases the likelihood of completing high school and may result in long-lasting consequences including restricted eligibility for federal grants and student loans and barriers to college enrollment and employment.[43]
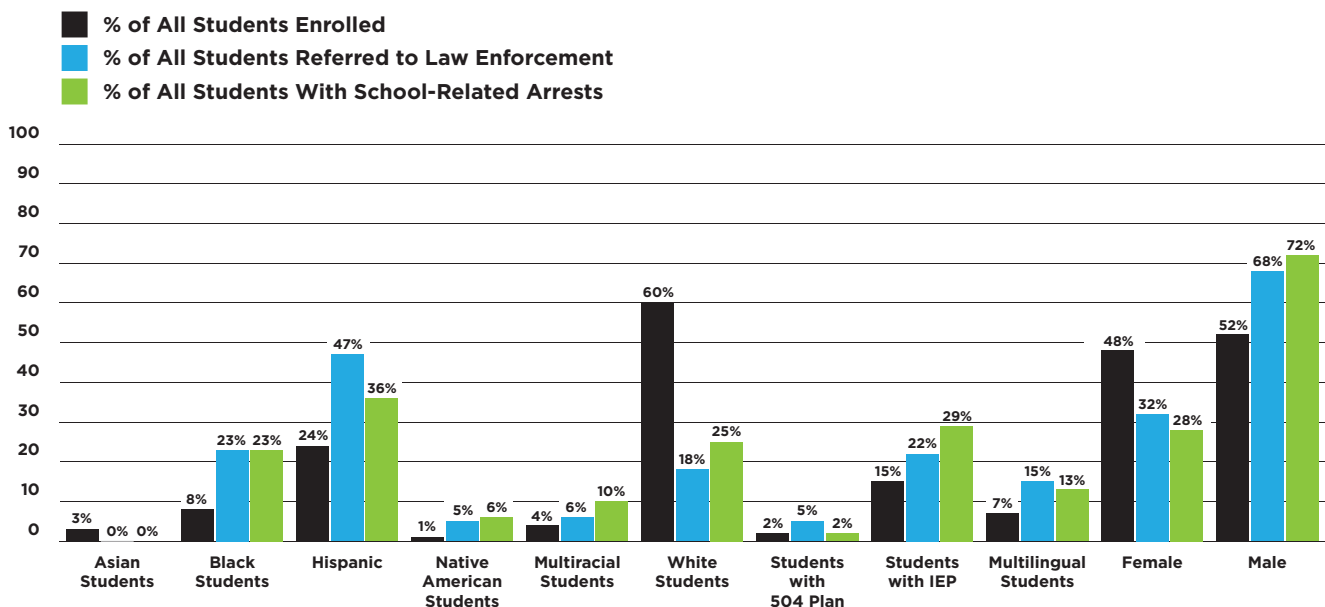
## Bias in School Discipline by Race/Ethnicity, Special Education Status, English Proficiency, and Gender, Rhode Island, 2015-2016

■ % of All Students Enrolled
■ % of All Students Referred to Law Enforcement
■ % of All Students With School-Related Arrests

| | % Enrolled | % Referred | % Arrests |
|---|---|---|---|
| Asian Students | 3% | 0% | 0% |
| Black Students | 8% | 23% | 23% |
| Hispanic | 24% | 47% | 36% |
| Native American Students | 1% | 5% | 6% |
| Multiracial Students | 4% | 6% | 10% |
| White Students | 60% | 18% | 25% |
| Students with 504 Plan | 2% | 5% | 2% |
| Students with IEP | 15% | 22% | 29% |
| Multilingual Students | 7% | 15% | 13% |
| Female | 48% | 32% | 28% |
| Male | 52% | 68% | 72% |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-2016 school year.

## Promising Practices

Increasing the ability of educators to identify racism and to understand the impact of discrimination and microaggressions on student mental health must be a top priority.[44] Data-based decision-making and positive intervention programs are integral to creating, improving, and sustaining positive school climates.[45] School policies and practices that promote safety and encourage student belonging are important, especially during the first years of secondary school.[46] Schools that consistently and deliberately engage students and educators as co-creators and co-leaders in setting clear academic and behavioral expectations and subsequently teach, model, and reinforce these expectations create positive school climates.[47,48]

Restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and positive disciplinary practices are effective approaches for creating positive student-teacher relationships, improving students' sense of belonging, building safe schools, and increasing academic outcomes. Restorative practices hold students accountable for their actions and support students' efforts in making changes needed to avoid negative behavior in the future.[49]

## Action Items:

### Equity

■ Acknowledge and address the traumatic experiences of students, including those related to poverty, violence, hate crimes, health crises, witnessing of racial injustices, and the long-standing impacts of systemic racism on students and their families.

■ Provide and require all educators, school staff and administrators to participate in continuous professional development focused on empathy, implicit bias, anti-racism, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed practices to improve school and classroom climates. This professional development should prepare educators to turn behavior management into student-centered social-emotional learning experiences.

■ Increase the percentage of educators of color in schools.

■ Increase the percentage of educators holding and using the English to Speakers of Other Languages and Bilingual Dual Language certifications.

### Youth Voice

■ Empower students, families, educators, and school staff to co-develop community norms and co-lead the reinforcement of these academic and behavioral expectations.

### Mental and Behavioral Health

■ Increase the number of school-based mental health professionals in schools and provide more opportunities for existing school-based mental health professionals to address the immediate needs of students.

■ Provide mental health resources and supports for educators and school staff.

■ Coordinate school-based efforts to address student mental health and trauma and ensure that all staff know how to connect students to mental health services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and develop a system for making referrals.

■ Provide and require all educators and school staff to engage in trauma and mental health training including common causes of mental health challenges and trauma and how to recognize the signs of distress.

■ Integrate community-based organizations that reflect the identities of students and provide culturally relevant social-emotional or mental health supports into school support systems.

■ Provide educators and schools with the resources needed to implement restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and positive discipline practices with fidelity.

### Policy

■ Incorporate *SurveyWorks* school climate indicators into the Rhode Island school accountability system.

■ Enforce the legal statute that restricts the use of out-of-school suspensions for non-violent offenses, limit the use of suspensions for students in Pre-K and elementary school, and continue to require school districts to identify any racial, ethnic, and special education disparities and develop a plan to reduce these disparities.

■ Require school districts to annually report the number of SROs and other law enforcement officers in schools, school-related arrests, and referrals to law enforcement, and to identify any racial, ethnic, language status, and special education disparities and develop a plan to reduce these disparities.

■ Reallocate funds for SROs and law enforcement officers in schools to fund the hiring of more school-based mental health professionals while ending the practice of arresting and referring students to law enforcement for non-violent offenses.

■ Provide and require all educators and school staff to participate in training on the effective use of data to address student academic and social-emotional needs, to adequately implement intervention programs, and to improve school climate. Provide real-time access to this data for all necessary educators and staff.

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# Acknowledgements

*Rhode Island KIDS COUNT*
*One Union Station*
*Providence, RI 02903*

*Phone: 401-351-9400*
*rikids@rikidscount.org*
*www.rikidscount.org*