



U.S. Department of Education Listening Session: School Safety

Remarks from Lindsay Jones
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June 6, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and share our views on how to improve school safety.

I am here today on behalf of the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), a non-profit organization that works to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 students with learning and attention issues in public schools across the country.

- We do this by empowering parents and young adults and advocating for equal rights and opportunities.
- NCLD has more than 40 years of experience providing essential information to parents, professionals and individuals with learning disabilities and attention issues, promoting research and programs to foster effective learning, and advocating for policies to protect and strengthen educational rights and opportunities.

In our conversations about school safety, we must also discuss the issues of school climate and discipline. And we must recognize the disproportionate impact these issues have on students with disabilities and, particularly, students of color with disabilities.

- Students with disabilities -- especially students with disabilities of color -- face disparate treatment in our nation's public schools.
 - Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be suspended as students without disabilities,¹ according to data released by the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection.
 - More than one quarter of African-American boys with disabilities received one or more out of school suspensions, compared to 1 in 10 white boys with disabilities.²
 - Students with disabilities (who account for only 12% of the student population) account for 25% of arrests at school.
 - Students with learning disabilities are also 31% more likely than their peers without disabilities to face high levels of bullying.³

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2016, October 28). 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look, available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

² *Id.*

³ Horowitz, S. H., Rawe, J., & Whittaker, M. C. (2017). *The State of Learning Disabilities: Understanding the 1 in 5*. New York: National Center for Learning Disabilities.

- There is no reason that this should be the reality of students of color or students with disabilities. Behavior does not explain the disparate rates of discipline they face. Bias does.

The [guidance](#) issued by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice in 2014 related to school discipline and Title VI is an important tool for schools and must be maintained.

- This jointly-issued guidance is meant to help educators address bias in discipline practices, improve day to day strategies, and uphold students' civil rights protections.
- To be clear: there is no link or correlation between the discipline guidance and continued violent acts in our schools. Instead, the guidance provides educators with actionable tools and strategies to improve discipline practices and foster a more equitable and welcoming school environment for all students.
- You must preserve the 2014 discipline guidance and continue to support educators in their efforts to implement equitable discipline practices.

Hardening our schools -- increasing police presence, installing metal detectors, or allowing teachers to bear arms -- is not the answer. Instead, it may actually perpetuate the problems we're already seeing and worsen the treatment of and outcomes for students with disabilities and students of color.

- There is little research supporting the use of these "hardening" measures to improve school safety or student outcomes. In fact, they may actually be harmful to students with disabilities and should not be used to address school safety or climate concerns.
- **A report by the National Association of School Psychologists⁴** found no evidence that the use of metal detectors, security cameras, or guards in schools actually prevented school violence, and - - instead -- that it can have a negative impact on students' sense of safety.
- Increasing police presence in schools may actually further the disproportionate treatment of students with disabilities and students of color, increase the criminalization of non-violent student behavior, and exacerbate discipline issues and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Instead, we must invest in proactive, evidence-based strategies to improve school safety and climate. These include multi-tier systems of support, positive behavioral interventions and supports, social emotional learning programs, and comprehensive mental health counseling programs. The U.S. Department of Education plays a critical role in providing funding and technical assistance to allow states and districts to implement these evidence-based programs.

- For example, PBIS fosters a positive school climate and incorporates development of students' social skills and relationship-building. It provides students with essential skills and a supportive community that can lead to healthy and positive school environments.
 - PBIS has been shown to decrease student discipline referrals and problem behavior, improve student instructional time and engagement. Additionally, it provides a

⁴ National Association of School Psychologists (2013). "Research on School Security: The Impact of Security Measures on Students. Available at: <http://www.audioenhancement.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/06/school-security-by-NASP.pdf>. See also CRS Report (2013) finding that "The body of research on the effectiveness of [school resource officer] programs is limited, both in terms of the number of studies published and the methodological rigor of the studies conducted," available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf>

framework for schools to implement coaching and professional development practices as well as data-based decision making.

- For two decades, research in the education field has built the evidence base behind PBIS and the federal government has invested in this proven program. PBIS has been included in IDEA since the reauthorization in 1997 as a strategy schools and districts can use to better serve students with disabilities.
- For two decades, research in the education field has built the evidence base behind PBIS and the federal government has invested in this proven program.
- Importantly, there are many existing opportunities within ESSA for schools to invest in PBIS. Districts can use Title IV-A funding to improve student behavioral health, school climate, or school safety or Title II Part A funding for professional development on PBIS.

These are important issues facing our schools today, but there are clear ways forward.

- The disability community's shared experiences can shed light on how to improve school safety for all students. We ask that you continue to include us in conversations about school safety, climate, and discipline.
- Because these issues permeate all races, ethnicities, and student groups, positive common-sense solutions must include everyone.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today. We look forward to continuing this conversation as we move forward and find a way to keep all of our nation's children safe.