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Fostering Stronger and Safer Schools and Communities in Michigan

Everyone wants and expects children to be safe at school. While events like school shootings bring school safety to the national agenda, every day children and youth in schools or elsewhere in their lives face violence and other adverse experiences. Research shows that brain architecture can change with daily exposure to toxic stress, stalling the growth of brain regions that best regulate decision making. Support from adults can alter this trajectory, but without help, children and youth will adapt themselves, sometimes with potentially violent behavior, sometimes when they're at school. Creating safe schools requires a commitment to prevention, identification, and intervention with violence and trauma in both schools and communities.

Violent behaviors are most often the culmination of a combination of factors over time that can be seen, addressed and often prevented. Some factors stem from how students treat each other—one-quarter of students reported being bullied at school in 2015, and students who bring weapons to school have often been bullied.ⁱ School policies and practices play a role too—7% of students are suspended from school every year, a rate that was 13% of students of color and 20% of students of color in special education. Many factors, though, are outside of school—the US Department of Education has found that most school attackers had difficulty coping with events in their personal lives.ⁱⁱ More children and youth are victims of abuse or neglect in Michigan than in the past, and substance misuse and family economic insecurity are rising.

Michigan must take a comprehensive approach to childhood violence. Some seek to make schools tougher places for attackers, but there is concern this approach could make students feel less safe in school than they already do. Research shows that welcoming and inviting schools improve learning. While policies regulating access to and use of guns are necessary to improving school safety, these will be most effective when paired with universal and targeted measures to prevent violence. Michigan's Children recommends the following strategies:

- **Ensure access to health care, especially mental health care, for Michigan children**
Lower health care costs free up resources for other basic needs, reducing the stress of adults in a home. Access to assessment and treatment services, especially for mental health, means children and caregivers can get help for whatever they may be experiencing.
- **Expand high quality, affordable child care and early education for low-income families**
Affordable, high-quality child care fosters child safety and well-being by ensuring that children are cared for early in life, and that parents connected to their job or other social circles, strengthening the webs of concrete and social support available.

- **Expand funding for community-based prevention services for young children ages 0-5**
Local child abuse and neglect councils and others convene community stakeholders, including educators, local public health and law enforcement, to coordinate efforts to provide families with prevention services and advance school and community safety.
- **Train school staff to implement trauma-informed approaches in schools.**
Students feel safe in school when they feel a teacher or other adult in school cares about them.ⁱⁱⁱ By helping professionals better recognize student needs, trauma-informed practices, paired with wraparound services, prevent potentially violent behavior and help students feel like there's an adult in school who cares for them.
- **Expand school-linked community health and mental health services.**
Access to professionals (such as counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers) trained to coordinate services for individuals with behavioral needs is essential.
- **Expand afterschool programs for at-risk youths.**
Afterschool programs keep young people engaged in their learning and help them build positive social connections with their peers in welcoming environments.
- **Encourage increased data sharing and coordination across local public agencies.**
Schools, law enforcement, public health, and others need to work together to prevent, identify, and intervene with violent behavior, and many areas need resources to create the infrastructure to make it happen.
- **Listen to young people themselves and their recommendations**
The most recent crisis has served as a catalyst for many young people to get engaged in the public conversation about school violence. Policymakers at all levels need to make room for those expert voices in on-going efforts to address these issues.

ⁱ Pham, TB et al. (2017). Weapon carrying among victims of bullying. American Academy of Pediatrics. Accessed online <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/140/6/e20170353.full.pdf?download=true>

ⁱⁱ US Department of Education Safe School Initiative. 2004. Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States. Accessed online: <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ NCES. (2018). Students' relationships in school and feelings about personal safety at school. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018096.pdf>