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Focus: School Safety

Students Demand Safe, Supportive Schools

Student Authors Call for Ending Zero Tolerance and School-Based Policing

by Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D.

Thirty years after President Bill Clinton signed the *Gun Free Schools Act* on March 31, 1994, students continue to face unacceptable threats to their safety and belonging at schools. With the horrific rise in school shootings since the Act’s adoption, policymakers have prioritized spending precious taxpayer resources on hardening, surveillance and policing measures, such as panic buttons, facial recognition software, bullet-proof whiteboards, armed educators and school-based police (APA 2024; Walker 2019).

These measures will not prevent school shootings (Turanovic, et al., 2019). And, in practice, they make students less safe at school (Craven 2022).

Students have a long history of organizing to oppose school hardening and zero-tolerance measures (Warren, 2021). Black, Latino, LG-BTQ+ and other allied young people have led youth movements to end school policing programs, eliminate zero-tolerance discipline systems, increase funding for schools to invest in evidence-based prevention and support measures, and demand firearm reform (Onyena-cho, 2020; Mejia Mesinas, 2020; Mariette, et al., 2017; Chávez, 20018).

Parents and policymakers should listen to them.

IDRA invited students to share their experiences, perspectives and thoughts on school safety. With their permission, we selected a few submission excerpts for publication in this school-safety-themed newsletter.

Envisioning a Safe School Environment

Aairah Salam, 11th grade

Safety. Acceptance. Love.

This is what all kids yearn for and have the right to obtain when they go to school. However, school safety has been recently questioned and compromised.

Just in this past year, there were 302 school shootings, a record high with an average of one shooting every school day. What this means: a student traumatized for life, a mother receiving the last text from her son stating “I love you,” a dad losing his only child, his joy, his life, a teacher unable to go back to her kids, a school losing its spark, a community hurt for life.

We must act now.

For me, school safety is held on a high pedestal as school is a second home where I can engage in meaningful, educational discussions both inside and outside of the classroom, meet and
(cont. on Page 2)

“Policymakers, listen up. Arming teachers will not work! More security in our schools does not work! Zero-tolerance policies do not work! They make us feel like criminals. We should feel empowered and supported in our schools.”

– Edna Chávez, 12th grade

(Students Demand Safe, Supportive Schools, continued from Page 1)

create friends, be a part of a team both academic and sports, and so much more.

I get in the car ready to go to school envisioning a safe environment where I don't have to worry about my safety being at risk as that's a given. However, recent trends, as previously presented, show this has significantly changed and, like never before, we're being told what to do if there's an active shooter, a concern never previously brought up.

Worrying about school safety went from being an insignificant matter to one I have to prepare myself for in certain cases. This is heartbreaking.

With this, I call upon each individual to reflect and fight to never normalize such events to occur in order to allow students to go to school without worrying about their basic safety.

Schools Should Foster a Beautiful Environment

Annika P. Singh, 11th grade

School spirit has become a ghost of the past.

Community building and inclusion have always been tricky for teenagers, what with complex social structures, socio-economic barriers and complicated external events affecting children's social-emotional states. Before the Internet, when children found themselves excluded, they eventually mustered the courage to establish themselves or talk to a counselor. Maybe a group found ways to welcome them in, or some amount of assimilation occurs to fit in.

But we are in a new age, where a much less intimidating alternative to workshopping oneself until one finds friends stands: the Internet. The Internet connects millions of individuals glob-

ally, and social media platforms encourage tight-knit communities over any imaginable interest.

A teenager's phone is a world in their pocket, filled with color, entertainment and, critically, people. Conclusively, many students who may have tried another shot at friends or asked their counselor for assistance, have a new quick-and-easy digital option. This, paired with COVID-19, has resulted in the indisputable fact that a lack of community among students has become alarmingly prevalent in schools.

The adverse effects of this are harsher now with the benevolent hand of the Internet. It strips or replaces the critical social growth children normally receive with digital echo chambers that shut down the consideration of new ideas. This is why parents and schools must work in cohorts to restore student-to-student community efforts and socialization.

But kids can't be blamed for this epidemic of isolation whatsoever. Most of our rising or current high schoolers suffered some impairment from quarantining, found digital communities away from home, and indulged in the Internet to fulfill social desires. There have been dramatically negative effects from this: children getting preyed upon online, becoming radicalized to hateful ideologies, growing addicted to scrolling, and, in some cases, losing sympathy for their peers that match stereotypes they've been taught on the Internet.

To address this incredibly modern issue, we must outline guides for parents on how to approach a socialization discussion with their teenagers, how to be sensitive to social insecurities, and monitoring content to keep an eye on that is potentially hateful, racist or sexist.

Schools must not interfere but work to intentionally provide environments that foster community (which is no longer a given). They must seek out student leaders and make mental well-being a priority through – not false promises – but honest action.

This action should foster a beautiful environment where children feel welcome enough to bond with each other. In a nation that seems so disconnected, polarized and extremist at times, local ties are critical to student mental health, the collaboration skills of our future leaders, the humanity with which we treat one another, and our nation's health.

Our youth should live in a world that's brighter than their screens, and we can achieve that by community-building at the local level as much as possible. Only then will their social creativity flourish.

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Where Some Policymakers and School Leaders Get School Safety Wrong

by Morgan Craven, J.D.

We know from a growing body of research that strong relationships; diverse, well-trained teachers and staff (including mental and behavioral health professionals); proactive and meaningful problem solving; and swift, appropriate reactions to the needs of the school community are the keys to creating safe and welcoming schools (Craven, 2022). Punitive, exclusionary discipline and school-based policing are not (Tocci, et al., 2023).

Still, some policymakers continue to draw incorrect and unsupported connections between school safety and harmful forms of discipline and criminalization (Wall, 2023). They wrongly believe that punishing and policing small behaviors – even ones that are age appropriate or a symptom of an underlying need – will create safer schools and prevent future violence.

Worse, they pass policies that rely on these beliefs, providing a false sense of security to some, while ultimately setting up expensive, ineffective interventions that may actually cause harm to students and school climates. (See Rebekah Skelton's article on Page 5 for an analysis of how these beliefs have shaped federal and state laws and policies over the last three decades.)

How does the harmful school safety-discipline cycle work?

We are seeing a repeated cycle of harmful school security policies and practices that are not providing real safety and are actually compromising the welcoming schools we want for all students. How does this happen?

First, many states, school districts and campuses do not have a clear and well-communicated system of holistic, preventative and proactive school safety. When these systems are not in place and are not clearly articulated to the school community, then teachers, students and families may have understandable concerns over campus safety, especially following horrific violence in other schools. These concerns

can result in demands for change and stronger, more visible security measures.

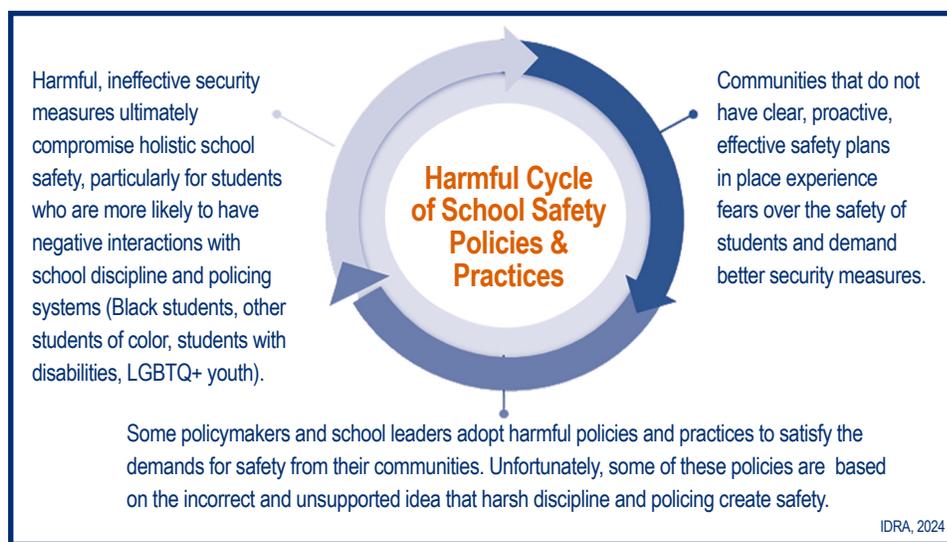
In response to these fears, some policymakers and school leaders adopt policies and practices that criminalize, punish, and isolate students and lead to fractured relationships. Some may invest in harmful, costly and ineffective – yet highly visible – approaches, like school-based police and extreme surveillance and school hardening measures.

These leaders may take a zero-tolerance approach to student behaviors, incorrectly promoting the idea that punishing and criminalizing small behaviors will somehow prevent larger problems.

These harmful policies and practices focus on being reactive – not preventative or proactive. They incorrectly assert that extreme discipline and policing increase safety. These policies are particularly detrimental to the well-being of the students who are most likely to be unfairly targeted by punitive school discipline and policing practices: Black students, students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ students (CRDC, 2021).

(cont. on Page 4)

Rather than pouring money into costly, ineffective and harmful discipline and policing practices, policymakers at all levels and school leaders must invest in research-based practices that encourage relationship building and problem solving.



(Where Some Policymakers and School Leaders Get School Safety Wrong, continued from Page 3)

Finally, these harmful discipline policies and practices can result in diminished access to information and poor relationships between students and adults in schools. Critically, they isolate students and families who may need support and could benefit from the detection, protection, and referral services schools can provide, including services to address mental health needs or bullying and harassment.

In other words, when schools push children out, rather than pull them in when children need support, they miss opportunities to help address students' needs.

The vast majority of young people experiencing challenges in their personal lives or at school will never commit violent acts. For the very few who have, four out of five times another person has had knowledge of their plans to act (Vossekuil, et al. 2004).

Discipline systems that rely on isolation and criminalization create environments where students are discouraged from leaking important information. They may not confide in an adult about a challenging situation because they are afraid of getting themselves or another student into trouble.

Weakened relationships and fearful students leave campuses unsafe and block schools and other protective systems from identifying and proactively addressing problems.

Rather than pouring money into costly, ineffective and harmful discipline and policing practices, policymakers at all levels and school leaders must invest in research-based practices that encourage relationship building and problem solving.

These practices may include frameworks like multi-tiered systems of support or restorative practices but should be responsive to the needs and resources of the school community (Tocci, 2023; Duggins-Clay, 2022).

Policymakers and school leaders should also ensure all schools have diverse and well-trained teachers, nurses and mental and behavioral health professionals that have the support and time to address the needs of students and adults in the school. Investing in these and other proven strategies will help to promote safe schools without excluding or criminalizing students.

Build Safe Schools, Reject Hurtful Policies

Policy Responses to School Safety

All students have the right to attend safe, supportive and welcoming schools

<p>✘ Safety strategies that harm students</p> <p>School-based policing and campus hardening create unwelcoming environments</p> <p>School-based law enforcement, unnecessary locks and barriers, disruptive metal detectors, and invasive surveillance technology can make schools feel more like prisons than the open and welcoming learning environments we want for students.</p> <p>School policing and hardening can be expensive, ineffective and can compromise the civil rights and privacy of students. Additionally, these measures often target students of color in particular.</p> <p>Schools with a population of more than 50% of students of color are 2 to 18 times more likely to use a combination of "safety" tactics, like metal detectors, locked entrances, school police, security guards and random security sweeps.</p> <p>Harsh disciplinary practices ignore student needs</p> <p>Suspensions and other harsh discipline methods hurt students. They force them to miss classroom learning time with their peers, increase likelihood of grade attrition, and decrease the likelihood students will graduate and go on to college.</p> <p>Pushing students out of their classrooms ignores and fails to address challenges that young people may be facing, such as whether a student is homeless, is in foster care, has a disability, has no disciplinary history or a student acted in self-defense.</p> <p>Harmful discipline practices also enable adults who may be excluding certain students, like Black students or students with disabilities, because of bias and harmful beliefs about who deserves punishment and who deserves support. In 2017-18, Black students accounted for 38% of out-of-school suspensions (one or more) despite only making up 15% of the U.S. student population.</p>	<p>✔ Safety strategies that help students</p> <p>Cultivate strong relationships that build strong schools</p> <p>Schools should adopt policies that make engaging and building trust within the whole school community a standard practice, including educators, staff, students and families.</p> <p>Create safe environments using research-based methods</p> <p>Implementing research-based strategies that are preventative, focus on community building, identify issues and needs, and respond to conflict creates a safe learning environment for students.</p> <p>Classroom-level strategies, such as setting clear expectations in the classroom, incorporating social and emotional learning and building relationships with students, reinforce positive behavior and help school climates.</p> <p>Train educators & staff</p> <p>Ensure all educators and staff are trained to recognize the needs of the campus community from basic care, like food and medical care, to addressing bullying when it occurs and the need for mental health support.</p> <p>Meet recommended ratios between students & counselors</p> <p>Schools should invest in counselors, social workers and other professionals so students can receive the support they need. The recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1. Only two states meet this ratio. Students are not getting their needs met.</p> <p>Support meaningful changes to gun regulations</p> <p>Gun violence is the leading cause of death for U.S. children. It is important to reduce the presence of weapons in our schools and communities that pose a risk to staff, students and the school environment.</p>
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Learn more in our issue brief by Morgan Craven, J.D.:
What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student – A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students
<https://idra.news/SafeSchoolsIB>

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 and get the Issue brief – <https://idra.news/SafeSchoolsIB>

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Thirty Years Later, the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act Continues to Harm Students and Communities

By Rebekah Skelton

Thirty years after the passage of the *Gun-Free Schools Act* of 1994 – the landmark bill that promised to bring an end to gun violence on school campuses – schools are no safer now than they were when the law went into effect (Riedman, 2024).

In an attempt to foster school safety through punitive measures, the Act required each state to create and implement a law mandating at least a one-year expulsion of students who brought a weapon to school and referral to a local criminal legal or juvenile legal system. The bill also gave states wide latitude to design and implement policies as they saw fit.

Many states seized the opportunity to “crack down” on student misbehavior by both expanding on the act to encompass less serious offenses – such as shoving, disrupting or skipping classes, and cursing – and operationalizing school policing and punishment systems. This response system became known as “zero tolerance.”

The result is a school system that surveils, polices and criminalizes students at extraordinary rates (Giroux, 2003; Irby & Coney, 2021; Noguera, 2003); functions like a prison system (Johnson & Davis, 2021; Meiners, 2007; Schlesinger & Schmits-Earley, 2021; Wun, 2018); and pushes students out of schools and into the criminal legal system (Christle, et al., 2005; Morris, 2018; Skiba, et al., 2014; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Three decades after the *Gun-Free Schools Act's* passage, these policies and practices continue to harm students, particularly students of color, students in families with limited means and students with disabilities.

Law Expands the Carceral State

President Bill Clinton signed the *Gun-Free Schools Act* into law in March 1994 as fears of

violent crime were gripping the nation. Despite evidence that crime in urban areas was actually decreasing (Morgan & Truman, 2020), television news broadcasts filled the airwaves with sensationalized reports of gun violence in urban communities (Beale, 2006).

Seizing on public fears, federal lawmakers passed two of the most significant crime bills in modern history: the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act* and the *Gun-Free Schools Act*, which has been described as the Clinton crime bill's “sister legislation that targeted school-aged children and youth” (Irby & Coney, 2021).

In the following years, studies revealed an increase in suspension and expulsion rates across the country, especially among students of color and students with disabilities (Rafa, 2019).

During the 2022-23 school year in Texas, for instance, schools recorded a total of nearly 1.6 million disciplinary actions, including in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, placement in disciplinary alternative education programs and juvenile justice alternative education programs, and expulsions (TEA, 2023a). Black students, low-income students and students with disabilities were all disproportionately represented among students who were disciplined (TEA, 2023b).

While Black students make up less than 13% of the total student population in Texas, 26% of disciplinary actions were against Black students (TEA, 2023b). Additionally, nearly 81% of disciplinary actions were taken against students identified as economically disadvantaged, though they comprise 63% of the student population (TEA, 2023b).

These data are representative of nationwide trends showing that marginalized student
(cont. on Page 6)

By investing in the people, policies and practices that lead to healthy, thriving communities, schools can create welcoming and inclusive learning environments that have no need for zero-tolerance policies.

(Thirty Years Later, the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act Continues to Harm Students and Communities, continued from Page 5)

populations have been criminalized for minor, nonviolent offenses and pushed out of school and into the school-to-prison pipeline since the implementation of the *Gun-Free Schools Act* (Skiba, et al., 2014; Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Wald & Losen, 2003).

In addition to exacerbating the harms of punitive discipline and policing in schools, data show that the *Gun-Free Schools Act* has not even served its intended purpose of preventing gun violence in schools. In 1994, the year it was signed into law, there were 40 reported incidents of gun violence in K-12 public schools in the United States (Riedman, 2024). In 2023, the last full year for which school data were available, there were 346 reported incidents of gun violence (Riedman, 2024).

Policy-makers Should Learn from Past Mistakes

Though states slowly moved away from zero-tolerance policies in recent years (Irby & Coney, 2021; Johnson, 2016), lawmakers from across the country, and especially in the U.S. South, have returned to proposing punitive school legislation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and school shootings.

In the past year, many states drafted policies that would have increased the use of exclusionary discipline in schools, including:

- SB 245 in Texas would have allowed teachers to remove students from any class after a single act of behavior the teacher deemed unruly, disruptive or abusive.
- SB 244 in Florida would have allowed teachers to remove “disobedient” and “disrespectful” students from their classrooms.
- LB 811 in Nebraska would have allowed teachers to physically restrain and remove “disruptive” students from their classrooms.
- HB 188 in North Carolina would have allowed suspensions for behaviors previously considered minor offenses, such as inap-

All students deserve to attend public schools that give them every opportunity to attain college and career success.

See IDRA’s resources on school policing, including articles, statements and sample resolutions.

<https://idra.news/SchoolPolicing>



propriate language, dress code violations or minor fights.

While none of these bills were ultimately signed into law, it is clear that elected officials are beginning to revisit failed zero tolerance policies as a response to heightened fears of school violence.

If history is any indicator, the resurgence of zero-tolerance policies will not make schools safer for students. Rather than make the same mistakes they did 30 years ago, lawmakers should fully divest from punitive disciplinary practices, which do not address root causes of violence and harm.

Instead, policymakers should invest in capacity-building solutions that provide support and resources to schools “to help residents build local institutions, support social networks and create social citizenship” (Roberts, 2007).

More schools should implement transformative and restorative justice models, which focus on preventing and repairing harms through inclusive practices that bring students and educators together.

Additionally, gun violence that occurs in any environment, including schools, cannot adequately be addressed without acknowledg-

ing the fact that “guns are at the root of gun violence and pose a threat to the physical safety of young people” (Craven, 2022). Firearms are the leading cause of death for young people and took the lives of 4,752 children and teens in 2021 alone (Davis, et al., 2023).

Therefore, it is imperative that “a complete solution for increasing school safety... address the common denominator present in so many instances of violence in our schools and communities” (Duggins-Clay, 2023).

Solutions to school discipline and safety issues must emphasize violence prevention, positive behavior interventions and supports, and community wellness, rather than punishment and exclusion.

By investing in the people, policies and practices that lead to healthy, thriving communities, schools can create welcoming and inclusive learning environments that have no need for zero-tolerance policies.

Resources

Citations available online at: <https://idra.news/Newsletters>.

Rebekah Skelton is an IDRA intern. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at rebekah.skelton@idra.org.

(Students Demand Safe, Supportive Schools, continued from Page 2)

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IDRA Names Youth Advisory Board Members

Five High School Students Serve as Advisors for Education Equity Initiatives While Learning New Skills

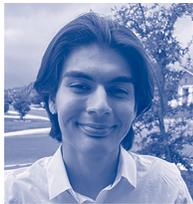
Five Texas high school students will provide their insights about equity in education and advocacy. Since our founding 51 years ago, IDRA has remained committed to prioritizing students in our decision-making. We selected these five student leaders who now form IDRA's 2024 Youth Advisory Board.

Our Youth Advisory Board provides a more focused way to engage with students to center their communities' expertise, needs and dreams in our work. During this year, the students are learning to analyze policies and research, build networks with other groups of advocates, create engaging content and host a youth-led event.

IDRA provides the students training on research, advocacy and community engagement strategies to sharpen their relationship-building and presentation skills. They are compensated for their work.

Diego Aranguiz Mourgues

Diego Aranguiz is a high school junior in San Antonio. He is passionate about education equity and mental health awareness, specifically as it relates to veterans and students. As a Youth Advisory Board member, Diego hopes to gain a better understanding of education policy and the state legislature so that he can leverage his experiences and skill set to create impactful change within the education systems. Diego is a straight-A student and a student-athlete, serving as a member of the varsity cross-country and track teams. He was recently honored with the Fighting Heart Award for his commitment, leadership and mentorship of other athletes. After high school, Diego plans to continue his education by pursuing a degree in business. He hopes to one day build a legacy that will positively impact his community.



Much of IDRA's work, like our Youth Advisory Board program, is made possible through the generous support of individuals and organizations. We invite you to donate to help us sustain and grow our work or contact us to explore programmatic support.



<https://idra.news/SupportOurLegacy> • contact@idra.org

Grace Ding

Grace Ding is a Chinese American high school sophomore based in Houston. Her relentless passion for free speech and intersectionality stems from the recent book bans and censorship occurring in her school district. As the founder of her school's civics club, she takes a special interest in advocating student rights and representation on all levels, including education. She looks forward to learning more about quantitative research regarding education equity through IDRA. Grace actively envisions a future with intersectional social change, and she believes students are ultimately critical to this mission. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing and sipping coffee.



the collaboration within the cohort and understanding other visions on the future of education policy. In her free time, Inayah enjoys reading, watching movies and cooking. She is also very active in Model UN.

Mikel Quesada

Mikel Quesada identifies as a 17-year-old neurodivergent junior from Heights High School in Houston, where he is involved in many activities like mariachi, ballet folklorico and swimming. He aspires to become an aerospace engineer, so is currently in advanced classes. He says that, despite his school's attempts at taking away his accommodations, he receives help in these classes when needed. He enjoys playing video games and staying home but whenever possible also enjoys hanging out with friends. He is excited to become part of the Youth Advisory Board so he can tackle problems, like funding and issues related to special education.



Inayah Naqvi

Inayah Naqvi is a high school junior in San Antonio. She has a strong passion for learning about local policy in addition to foreign affairs and how they impact each other. Inayah's interest in education policy sparked after what she felt were a series of unfair school closures in San Antonio ISD and laws putting restrictions on the content of class curricula. Inayah is excited to be part of the Youth Advisory Board because she believes it will be an incredible opportunity to bring more attention to and advocacy to address those concerns. She looks forward to



Aniyah Turner

Aniyah Turner is a high school senior from Houston. Her favorite hobby is to learn about new things and experiences. She is excited to be included in the Youth Advisory Board because she feels like it is a great opportunity to help young kids in need, making them feel comfortable and like they are part of something bigger and that people are here to help them.



Focus: School Safety

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership Turns 40! See How VYP Improves Academics, Attendance & Socio-Emotional Learning

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership is a research-based, internationally-recognized dropout prevention and student leadership program that has kept 98% of its tutors in school. This cross-age tutoring program transforms student socio-emotional learning and relationships with school. It directly addresses socio-emotional factors that are essential to reconnecting and re-engaging with students.

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership is backed by research on **socio-emotional factors and learning**. The Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness & evaluation data show:

- 61%** of VYP tutors improved sense of self oriented toward the future
- 59%** of VYP tutors improved their sense of involvement in & caring for their families
- 54%** of VYP tutors improved their sense of being productive at their school work, enjoying school more & feeling successful at school
- 66%** of VYP tutors improved reading test scores
- 57%** of VYP tutors improved math scores



Learn more!

Website: See how the program operates, its research base, and awards.

Webinar: Learn how to bring the Valued Youth Partnership to your school.

Student Essays: Read what students say about their life-changing experience.

<https://idra.news/VYP>

*achieving equal educational opportunity for every child
through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college*