

## Safety Focus Groups Synthesis

Mass Insight (Mi) conducted sixteen focus groups open to all Allentown School District (ASD) stakeholders, including students, staff, families, and community members. To encourage attendance, Mi sent an invitation email, a calendar invite, and a reminder email to all registrants. All family focus groups included interpretation services for Spanish-speaking families. Due to low student turnout in initial focus groups, Mi joined one class at each middle and high school to ensure student voice was represented. In total, Mi spoke with 106 students, 27 family and community members, and 43 staff members representing 19 ASD schools.

Mass Insight asked each focus group a standard set of questions that the Safety Task Force approved.

- On a scale of 1-5 (one being not at all safe, and 5 being very safe), how safe is your school and why?
- What makes your school feel safe? What would make your school feel safer? What makes your school feel unsafe?
- Should schools have School Resource Officers and why? If so, what should their role be? (Examples: mentor students, monitor school grounds, discipline students)
- What are your greatest concerns regarding safety at your school?

As needed, Mass Insight asked follow-up questions to develop deeper understanding of stakeholder responses. The responses led to themes across questions and in many cases, across stakeholders. This synthesis is organized accordingly (overall strengths, overall concerns, a specific section regarding SROs, and some considerations for the Memorandum of Understanding with the Allentown Police Department). In organizing the synthesis, student voices are honored first, throughout.

This synthesis is organized into four sections:

- I. [Strengths](#)
- II. [Areas of Concern](#)
- III. [School Resource Officers](#)
- IV. [Memorandum of Understanding](#)

## I. Strengths

- **Stakeholders rate the safety of schools as moderately safe.** Across the focus groups and the survey, ratings of safety were moderate.
  - For focus groups, Mass Insight asked all stakeholders to rate the safety of the school or schools they interact with most, with one being not at all safe and five being very safe. There were not any stakeholders who rated their school as not at all safe.
  - For the survey, stakeholders were asked to respond yes or no for the following: “Overall, I feel my school is safe.” The results are organized by stakeholder groups below; deeper survey analysis could provide further insight into variance by school.

Stakeholder Group	Focus Groups (1-5 scale)	Surveys (yes)
Students	3.7 (n = 104)	83% (n = 1,775)
Family and community members	3.88 (n = 25)	85% (n = 669)
Staff	3.14 (n = 37)	72% (n = 912)

- **For families and students, relationships foster feelings of safety.** Family members report feeling safest when there are positive teacher-student relationships in the building and teachers provide structure in their classes. Students report that they feel safe when they have individuals they can trust in the school building, whether that is other students or school staff.
- **When there are clear expectations, routines, and procedures in place, this enables feelings of safety for staff.** Staff feel safest when all staff members have a shared understanding of safety procedures and policies, especially policies around individuals entering the school building. There were mixed reports regarding the extent to which this is a reality across schools.

## II. Areas of Concern

- **Students feel unsafe when incidents, especially fights, are not handled efficiently or taken seriously by school staff.** Across buildings, students shared that fights, and the way that fighting is handled by school staff, is one of their greatest safety concerns. Additionally, they shared that they feel fights could be prevented or resolved better by school staff, including teachers, counselors, and security guards.
- **All stakeholders have safety concerns regarding what happens outside of school buildings.** Stakeholders shared that there are many schools with busy roads, intersections, or traffic patterns that create unsafe conditions during arrival and dismissal. Students and staff do not always feel safe walking to and from

school due to a variety of factors. Some buildings struggle with students exiting the building without permission during the school day, and procedures regarding how to handle these situations are not clear.

- **All stakeholders report that the state of school facilities are a safety concern.** Across buildings, Mass Insight heard the following:
  - reports of doors with missing or broken locks, and exterior doors lacking devices to alert of an opening
  - reports of spaces in the schools (“nooks and crannies”) that are out of view of security cameras or where adults are unable to monitor student safety at all times
  - reports of the security desk and/or main office being positioned in a manner in which an individual can enter the building without first visiting the security desk or office
- **Teachers feel that staffing contributes to safety issues, and some students echoed these concerns.** This includes not having enough staff to promote safe choices in common spaces (e.g., hallways, cafeteria) or during transitions (e.g., arrival, dismissal). Staff report that this can often lead to situations that compromise safety being escalated or not responded to in a timely manner.

### III. [School Resource Officers](#)

- **The majority of all stakeholders (students, families, community members, and ASD staff) support SROs in schools. Stakeholders shared that there is an opportunity to improve the selection and training of officers.** According to the survey, 90% of students and families and 80% of community members support SROs in schools. In both the survey and focus groups, students, families, and community members advocated for specialized training in cultural competence, working with students with special needs, and relationship-building. 95% of staff members support SROs according to the survey. In focus groups, staff reported predominantly positive experiences with SROs in buildings.
  - *In reviewing survey results, open-ended responses indicate that many respondents do not understand the term “School Resource Officer.” Deeper analysis would be needed for greater confidence in survey results.*
- **While the majority of stakeholders support SROs in schools, a smaller number of individuals across stakeholder groups passionately believe SROs should not be in schools.** Some stakeholders feel that SROs contribute to criminalization of students of color, the school to prison pipeline, and are in conflict with the district’s restorative practices approach.
- **While the majority of ASD stakeholders support SROs in schools, there is a lack of clarity of the roles and responsibilities of SROs.** Not all stakeholders are clear on the roles and responsibilities of SROs. According to the survey, 75% of students, 68% of family and community members, and 69% of staff understand the roles and responsibilities of SROs.
  - In focus groups, staff shared that the roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of a given SRO is predominantly determined by the individual and is not consistent across schools or officers. They shared that the most effective SROs have close relationships with administration, staff, and students.

#### IV. [Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\)](#)

At the request of district leadership Mass Insight reviewed the current MOU revisions. Below is a table with a few noticings, none of which are legal guidance but rather considerations.

<b><u>Considerations for the MOU</u></b>	
<b><u>MOU</u></b>	<b><u>Consider:</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The MOU indicated that the school would share student rosters and yearbooks with the police.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussing if this aligns with the district's policies and values around student privacy.</li> <li>Clarifying if this policy is consistent with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The MOU specifies that police would only intervene when there is a "clear and present danger of serious physical injury."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarifying if police intervention would occur for danger to property (school or personal).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The MOU focuses exclusively on the Allentown Police Department (APD), but does not include anything about other agencies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussing and including the extent to which the district would or would not cooperate with APD if they were working in coordination with another agency (e.g., ICE, DEA).</li> </ul>