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School Safety, School Policing, and Students' Rights Focus of New Online Toolkit

Toolkit Provides Support for Students to Advocate for Themselves and Push for Changes in their School Communities

AUSTIN, Texas — With the start of a new academic year, many students, parents, educators, policymakers, and other members of school communities are worried about targeted school violence. They have questions about what they can do to ensure safe and supportive schools, without creating over-policed, hardened campuses, where administrators lean heavily on law enforcement interventions, zero tolerance, and other harmful, punitive approaches to student needs.

Three advocacy organizations — Texas Appleseed, Disability Rights Texas, and the Earl Carl Institute — have published an online toolkit, [Make My School Safe](#), designed to provide members of school communities and policymakers with answers to fundamental questions about school safety, law enforcement in schools, students' rights, and the impacts of school safety strategies on students with disabilities.

The toolkit, www.makemyschoolsafe.org, provides these resources and information:

- Explains strategies that have been shown to improve school climates and safety and debunks myths about those that do not;
- Describes the harms of relying on law enforcement in schools to interact with students in non-emergency situations;
- Provides practical tips for students about their rights in school;
- Focuses on the unique impact that school safety strategies can have on students with disabilities; and
- Encourages members of school communities to urge campus and district administrators to adopt effective school safety strategies.

“As we think about school safety, we must make sure that we are enacting policies that are based in research and have been shown to improve school climates for all children,” said Morgan Craven

of Texas Appleseed. “If we do not, we risk harming the very students we seek to protect as we pour valuable resources into strategies that do not work.”

The three organizations have spent years advocating for an end to the “school-to-prison pipeline” — the use of punitive and harmful school discipline and policing practices that increase the likelihood that students will experience trauma, academic failure, and future contact with the justice system. The toolkit places a special emphasis on the groups of students that feel the harms of the school-to-prison pipeline at disproportionately high rates but whose interactions with school police and the school discipline system are sometimes not emphasized in campus safety conversations — students with disabilities, Black and Latinx students, and LGBTQ students.

Dustin Rynders, Supervising Attorney, Disability Rights Texas said, “Many students with disabilities need individualized behavior supports, counseling and other interventions. When those services aren’t in place, it’s more likely a student with a disability will be viewed as a threat. This toolkit will play a valuable role in helping families get appropriate behavior supports in place for their children.”

In a time of increased student activism, the advocacy organizations hope that the toolkit will be useful to students, parents, educators, and other advocates who are working to protect students’ rights and to make positive systemic changes in their school communities.

“Our political leaders and broader community need to hear from the people who are most affected by harmful school policies — the students who experience them day in and day out,” said Morgan Owens at Earl Carl Institute. “I am hopeful that the civic engagement we are seeing from this generation is going to positively move our country closer to the ideals of equality and freedom that it was built upon. This toolkit provides a blueprint for student activists to elevate their voice and deliver real change for their campus and beyond.”

The toolkit also includes a number of important recommendations for campus, district, and state policymakers to consider, including:

- Limit the presence and duties of police officers in schools so that they are only focused on emergencies, not on routine discipline matters.
- Invest resources in positive school climate approaches, including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices, and mental and behavioral health experts like counselors and social workers.
- Ensure that behavioral threat assessments are used to determine appropriate, proportional responses to student needs and behaviors.

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About Texas Appleseed

Texas Appleseed is a public interest justice center that works to change unjust laws and policies that prevent Texans from realizing their full potential. Our nonprofit conducts data-driven research that uncovers inequity in laws and policies and identifies solutions for lasting, concrete change. For more information, visit www.TexasAppleseed.org.

About Disability Rights Texas

Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) is the federally designated legal protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities in Texas. Its mission is to help people with disabilities understand and exercise their rights under the law, ensuring their full and equal participation in society. Find out more at www.DRTx.org.

About the Earl Carl Institute

The mission of the Institute is to identify, address, and offer solutions to legal and social problems that affect traditionally urban and disenfranchised communities. The Institute, through interdisciplinary scholarship and advocacy, aims to develop the leadership, research, and advocacy skills of law students to encourage public service and to enable the students to effectively address problems of underserved communities. Visit www.earlcarlinstitute.org for more news, events, and donor information.