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**U.S. House of Representatives Education and the Workforce Committee
Hearing on “Protecting Students and Teachers: A Discussion on School Safety”**

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Good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to discuss a subject vitally important to all of us. I am David Osher, and I am a vice president of the American Institutes for Research. AIR is a nonpartisan behavioral and social science research organization based here in Washington. We don't advocate for any policy position, so this is a chance for me to talk about evidence-based practices in hopes of helping you with your decisions.

Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes or easy solutions to respond to the tragedy at Sandy Hook – or any of the other school shootings that have abruptly altered so many lives. But there are steps we can take to change the school environment so that students and teachers feel safe. And research shows that students and teachers perform better when their schools improve discipline by focusing on student self-discipline, not external punishment; by promoting healthy behaviors not suppressing unhealthy ones; by preventing problem behaviors rather than focusing on punishment; building connections to students, not removing them from the school community; and coordinating services systematically, not adding services piecemeal.

Safe and successful schools create positive school climates where students have good social and emotional skills, feel physically and emotionally safe, are connected to and supported by their teachers, and feel challenged and are engaged in learning. These schools do this by employing a three-tiered approach to social emotional learning, positive behavioral support, the support of student and family engagement, and addressing students' academic and mental health needs.

For two decades I have conducted research and led national centers, studies, and expert panels that focused on safety, violence prevention, the conditions for learning, and student support. Today, I would like to focus on some of my experiences in Cleveland.

I led an AIR audit of city schools following a 2007 shooting in which a 14-year-old who had been suspended for fighting, returned to his school – which had a security guard – shot two teachers and two students, and then took his own life.

The findings in our report were stark. While discipline was harsh and reactive, students and faculty felt unsafe. Services were fragmented and driven by adult desire, not by student need, and conditions for learning were poor.

City, school, and teacher union leaders embraced our recommendations and implemented a strategic tiered approach to improving conditions for learning and reducing discipline problems and violence.

Here are a few of the recommendations we made in 2008:

- Free up guidance counselors and school psychologists so they have more time to counsel students.
- Train school administrators, teachers and security staff to use positive approaches to discipline rather than reactive and punitive actions, to develop student social and emotional competence, and to better understand and communicate with the students.
- Develop an early warning and intervention system to identify potential mental health issues, and employ student support teams to address identified needs.

Last month, we released a paper – “Avoid Simple Solutions and Quick Fixes” – examining where Cleveland schools stand today. The picture is far from perfect, but progress clearly is being made and is attributable to the district wide use of student surveys to monitor progress, employing social emotional learning in all elementary schools, transforming punitive in-school suspension to planning centers to which students can self-refer and where students learn self-discipline, and coordinating services through student support teams.

For example, comparing the 2008-2009 school year to the 2010-2011 year:

- The attendance rate district-wide increased 1.5 percentage points.
- Out-of-school suspensions decreased 58.8 percent district wide.
- There were statistically significant decreases in the average number of reported behavioral incidents per school. Disobedient/disruptive behavior went from 131.8 to 73.9 per school, and the average number of cases involving fighting/violence went from 54.5 to 36.4.

Promotion and prevention are more effective, improve conditions for learning, and have less counterproductive or harmful side-effects than do suppression and punishment—particularly for vulnerable students and students of color. Children and youth require safe and supportive schools if they are to succeed in school and thrive. These needs are particularly great for children who struggle with the adversities of poverty, such as students in Cleveland where all students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Cleveland provides an example of what is possible, even in hard times, and even under less than perfect conditions for implementing student centered policies, which reduce school removal, drop out, and the pipeline to prison.

Cleveland's successes are consistent with the recommendations of the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, a group of prominent researchers on school safety, which called for a balanced approach that focused on student support and connectedness and stated that "reliance on metal detectors, security cameras, guards, and entry check points is unlikely to provide protection against all school-related shootings, including the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary."

These recommendations are not new.

Thank you.

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