Thank you for allowing me to be part of this distinguished panel. I am a vice president of the American Institutes for Research. AIR is a nonpartisan not-for-profit behavioral and social science research organization based here in Washington, whose mission is to do and analyze high quality research and to support its effective use. My goal is to describe what research shows about making schools safer, supportive, and at the same time, better places to learn.

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. 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 altered so many lives.

But there are steps we can take to change the school environment so that students and teachers feel safe. Safe and successful schools create strong conditions for learning and well-being where students feel physically and emotionally safe; are connected to and supported by their teachers; feel challenged and are engaged in learning, and report that their peers have good social and emotional skills.

These schools do this by employing a three-tiered approach to social emotional learning: positive behavioral support; student and family engagement; and addressing students’ academic and mental health needs. To be effective these approaches must be culturally competent, family-driven, data informed, and implemented by adults who receive the training and support necessary to help them implement programs and approaches effectively.

My colleagues and I in numerous research projects and national and regional Technical Assistance Centers and Laboratories have seen positive school climates change the lives of culturally and linguistically diverse students, as well as students who have disabilities and those who experience poverty, trauma, homelessness, mobility, and marginalization.
We have seen this happen in Safe School/Healthy Student sites such as Springfield, Oregon that have built a three-tiered capacity to respond to student social and emotional needs. We have also seen it in Safe and Supportive School states, such as Maryland, that work with schools to collect, analyze, and respond to student, faculty, and family school climate surveys. We have also seen the consequences of not addressing the needs of these students and their teachers – academic and behavioral problems, disengagement, exclusionary discipline, push out and drop out, incarceration.

Safety is a basic human need. When students feel safe it is easier for them to be at ease, to concentrate on the work at hand, to be analytical, creative and reflective, to respond to others in a responsible manner, and to take appropriate academic risks whether it is merely raising their hand, challenging group think, or thinking out of the box. Safety, involves freedom from physical harm (whether it be an attack like the one in Sandy Hook or a fight in a school hallway) as well as freedom from emotional harm (such as bullying and adult sarcasm). Safety includes both actual and perceived risk.

Research demonstrates the impact of a lack of safety and perceptions of safety. My colleague Dr. Kimberly Kendziora and I found that school safety correlated more highly with statewide achievement test performance than did academic rigor, and my colleague Roger Jarjoura and I have confirmed this data across multiple years in Cleveland.

Connectedness and the experience of support are also important. Students who feel “connected” to school across these social/emotional indicators are more likely to have improved attitudes towards school, learning, and teachers; heightened academic aspirations, motivation, and achievement; and more positive social attitudes, values, and behavior.

This includes addressing discipline issues by encouraging student self-restraint rather than focusing on imposing punishment; by promoting healthy behaviors not suppressing unhealthy ones; by building connections to students, not by expelling them from the school community; and coordinating services systematically, not adding services piecemeal.

So what are the essential conditions for learning? While things like teacher quality, classroom size and other high-profile education factors are important, they are only part of what makes learning possible.

**Safety.** When youth feel physically and emotionally safe, they are better students. If they feel physically threatened, their defensive responses – whether skipping school, carrying weapons, acting tough, showing up late, or tuning out in class – impede learning. When students feel emotionally unsafe, they may exhibit avoidance behaviors and not participate in class.
Social and Emotional Learning. Although all students need to build their social and emotional competence, those scarred by trauma or other setbacks in childhood especially need to learn to understand and manage their emotions and relationships. When programs are effectively implemented, evidence shows that student social and academic outcomes improve.

Support. Youth need educators who “get” their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. Students learn more when they feel connected and attached to adults in school who care about them and treat them respectfully. Caring needs to be backed when necessary by available and quality support, from counselors, psychologists, social workers, mentors, and others who can help them succeed.

Challenge. Energizing students and getting them engaged in their education has academic, behavioral, cognitive and psychological components – all of which work better when the other conditions for learning are met. Many students who are at-risk attend schools where adults expect little of them and fail to earn their attention or effectively support learning.

As an example of this effort, I would like to talk about some of my experiences in Cleveland, where I led an 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:

- Implement evidenced-based social emotional learning programs universally
- Free up guidance counselors and school psychologists so they have more time to counsel students.
- Coordinate school and community mental health services and use data to deploy and evaluate services.
- 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.

- Use student surveys of conditions for learning for planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

Where do Cleveland schools stand today? Like most districts, the picture is far from perfect. However, progress clearly is being made in Cleveland and stakeholders attribute the improvements 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.

- Suspendable offenses were reduced from an incidence rate of 233 per school to 132 per school, and 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.

Cleveland also improved conditions for learning over this period with safe and support scales increasing the most. Analyses of the relationship between these data for schools and their state-test based performance ratings determined that Conditions for learning scores predicted 45 percent of the variance for elementary school reports, 60 per cent for middle schools, and 65 percent in high schools.

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.

What I am saying is neither new, nor my own position. These ideas were articulated by an expert panel convened at the request of the President in response to school shootings in 1998, which I had the good fortune of chairing, as well as the December 2013 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 focuses 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.”

Thank you.

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