

School Leaders Doing the
Work the Right Way:

Building Walls Between
Schools and the
Justice System

ALDINE ISD
HOUSTON, TEXAS



With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, AASA profiled five school districts that are building walls between schools and the justice system, engaging in restorative practices, working to eliminate bias and disproportionality, and providing all children with fair and equitable access to high-quality opportunities. Districts profiled were Aldine ISD, Houston, TX; Brownsville Area School District, PA; St. Louis Public Schools, MO; Phoenix Union High School District, AZ; and Riverhead Central School District, NY. We sought districts that worked intentionally to reduced school-related juvenile justice interactions where the superintendent and school system played a key role in changes to limit youth interaction with law enforcement, school-based arrests, and juvenile justice. AASA created five district profiles and a sixth composite/summary profile of the districts' work to reduce school - related juvenile justice interactions.

Each district profiled noted the impact that Covid-19 had on their efforts. While time out of school due to the pandemic posed challenges for everyone, it also provided districts with opportunities to make bold moves, such as fully embracing Social, Emotional Learning (SEL) and eliminating SRO contracts.



Superintendent: Dr. LaTonya M. Goffney

Number of Students: 67,130

Demographics: 74.6% Hispanic; 21.4% African American; 1.6% White; 1.01% Asian; .12% American Indian; 1.01% Asian; 1.03% Two or more races; .17% Pacific Islander

District Type: Urban/unincorporated

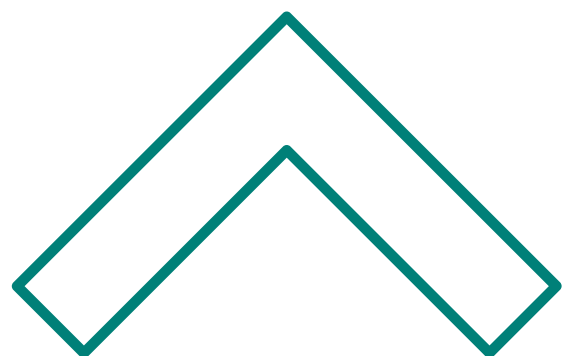
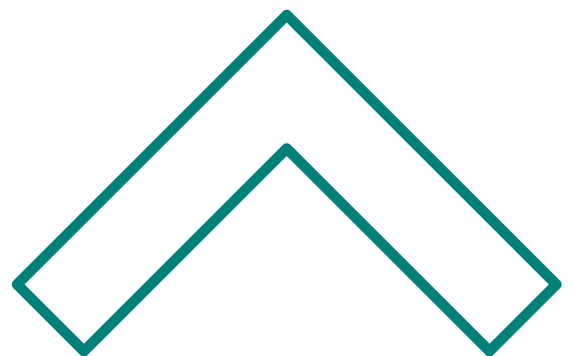
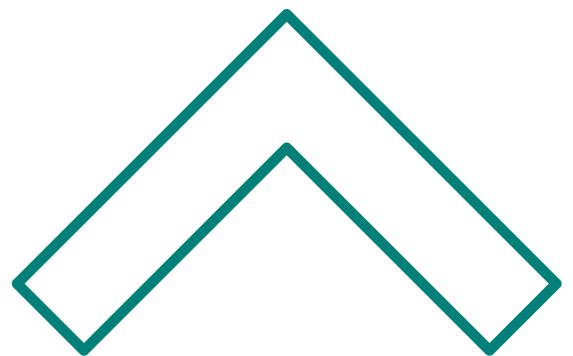
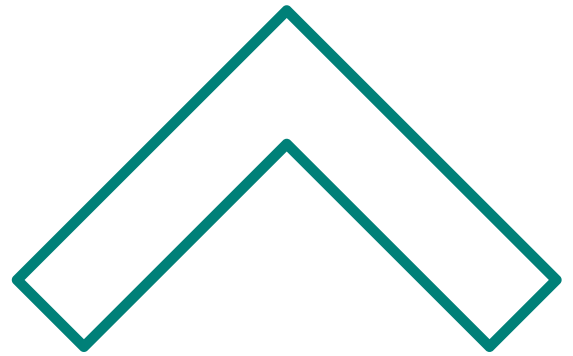
SRO in District: No, district has its own police department.

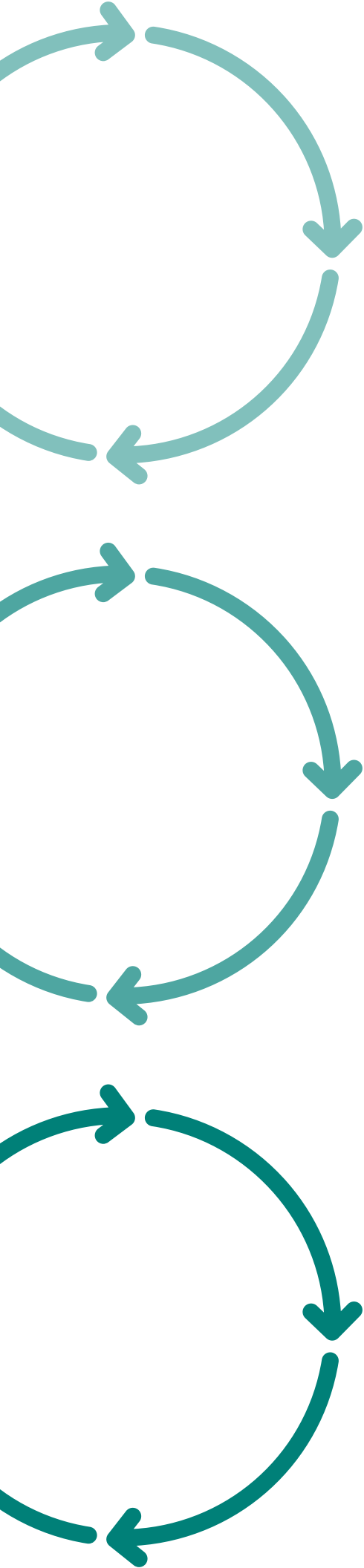
Aldine Independent School District (ISD): Located in Harris, Texas, Aldine ISD serves 67,130 students. Despite being categorized as a richly diverse district with vast opportunity, there are generational disadvantages regarding education attainment and economic status. Poverty is the common denominator of all students across the district, regardless of color. The district's FARM rate is greater than 90%, with most students receiving free meals. Utilization of free and reduced lunches suggests economic disadvantage among marginalized populations within the district.

Superintendent Catalyst: Dr. LaTonya Goffney came to Aldine Independent School District (ISD) in 2018. Upon arrival she was greeted by an article in the 'Houston Chronicle' that named the district the most dangerous in Houston. This would have been a daunting start for many, but Dr. Goffney had done her research and knew what she was getting into in her new district. Instead of running for the hills, she embarked on a year-long listening tour of the district, taking a hard look at the data, and building the team that launched a bold strategic plan in 2019. Dr. Goffney's listening tour uncovered many things, but achievement and discipline were the standouts: **low academic achievement and a high number of discipline referrals.**

At the end of the first year, the district launched the strategic plan with the following tenets: prioritize achievement; improve culture; leadership development; and family/community engagement. There was also a focus on equity in achievement, especially for special education students, who were disproportionately Black. The bulk of the work that impacts school discipline fell under the first two areas of the strategic plan – achievement and school culture.

Dr. Goffney brought in Dr. Kathy Roede to serve as Chief of Schools with a focus on social emotional learning (SEL) and school culture. Prior to Dr. Goffney's tenure with Aldine ISD, students were written up for every infraction, many of them discretionary. A cross-collaborative taskforce was brought together to review the link between an over-reliance on discretionary discipline referrals and poor academic outcomes. This group was also charged with reviewing the district's current SEL programming, discovering that as many as 20 different SEL programs were being used across schools in the district. The taskforce identified best practices to work in conjunction with the strategic plan on the integration of SEL, mental health, and culture. This included hiring Lorenzo Moore to serve as Director of SEL.





The task force was formulated not only on the district's public scrutiny, but on the realization that continued exclusionary discipline heavily impacts student performance in arithmetic and literacy scores. Recognizing that "we cannot arrest out of the problem," was key to identifying areas of change.

Discipline OSS & ISS Removal Days total Year

Year	Total days + parts of days
2014-2015	102,861
2015-2016	95,498
2016-2017	92,188
2017-2018	76,778
2018-2019	78,959
2019-2020	45,857
2020-2021	7,083
2021-2022	41,390

The district uses the Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) model to meet the needs of students and staff. SEL infuses all practices and is wrapped around/integrated into MTSS. The focus is on getting 85% of students at Tier 1 leaving 15% of students to manage at Tiers 2 or 3. **There is a focus on bullying prevention, safety, and dealing with conflict.** The district uses Restorative Practices for safe spaces when students and staff get escalated.

The team tasked with working on juvenile justice realized that a shift in mindset was needed across the Aldine ISD organization to move the focus from compliance to one of proactive actions to grow and develop students. This included working with Rethink Discipline in Houston. This cross-collaborative team was grounded in equity work that looked at policies and the school handbook, as well as needed changes to mindset and school culture. This change in school culture starts with how students are greeted at the door by all staff. Learning is collaborative, with students taking ownership of their learning, and each day ends with an optimistic closure where students engage with each other, sharing what they are excited about for tomorrow and the next day.

Police Department: Aldine ISD has its own school police department that is charged with protecting students from external threats so that they can learn safely inside district schools. They were oftentimes called to deal with discretionary offenses, but now must be proactive instead of reactive when dealing with student misbehavior. Solutions to address student discipline involve the family and teachers must deliver an in-class intervention to students before referring them to the office. The district's goal is to support students to stay in the classroom and learning. This includes reducing the numbers of in-school suspensions (ISS) – an Assistant Superintendent now must approve any punishment that requires more than three days of missed class time. Good behavior is rewarded – 80-90% of students do not repeat infractions.

Officers are employees of the school district and, as such, receive professional development and training along with other staff so they too understand the importance of having more compassion and empathy, as well as mental health support and SEL. The officers work in conjunction with other staff members on campus and are trained to recognize students in mental health crisis. They utilize other avenues before arrest (arrest results in time out of school and/or enrollment in the district's alternative school for a prescribed period). The department works with the school community to engage them and build their trust as another way to reduce discipline referrals.

Since the more lax mindset of compliance and increased empathy among school staff, student arrests have dropped from 104 in 2018 to 12 in 2021. Numbers have still not surpassed the 136 arrests in 2017, even with the detrimental impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, a high reduction in in-school suspensions from the time the new superintendent was inducted (78,959 in 2018) to implementation of the task force (7,083 in 2021).

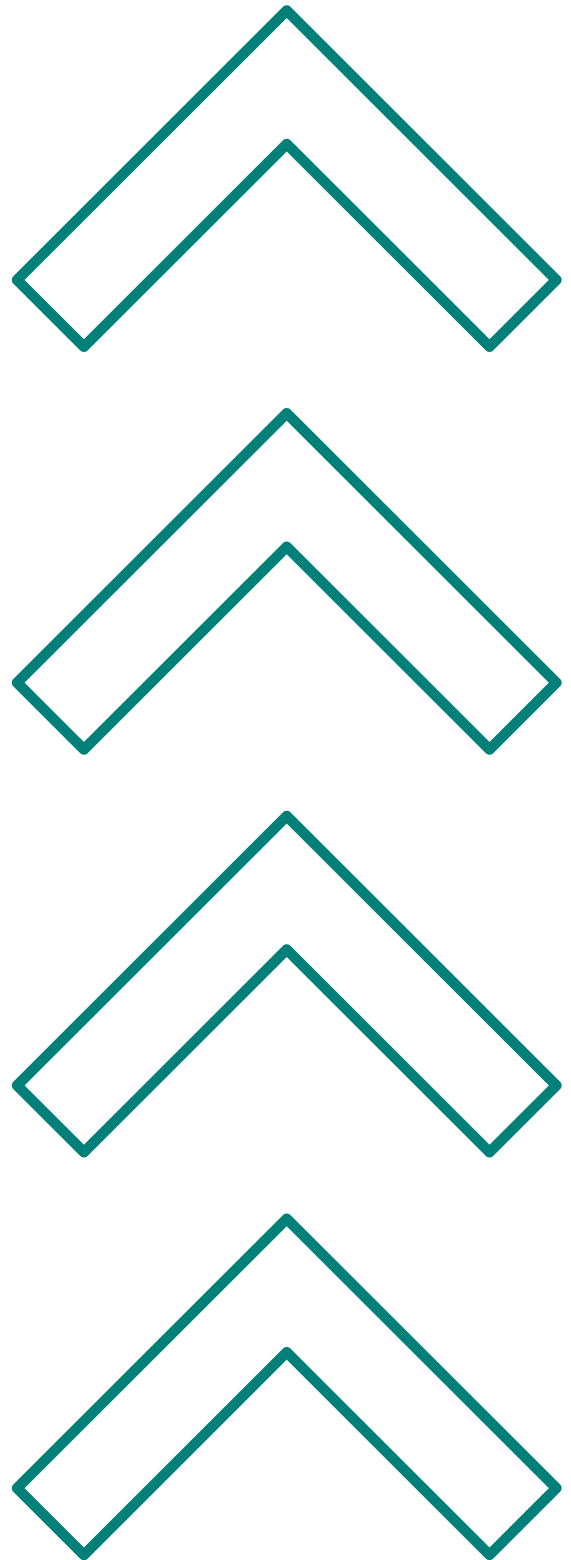


Police-involved Youth: The local police department notifies the executive director of school administration, Todd Lindeman, whenever a young person is arrested outside of school. There are clear communication and protocols in place between the police and school district. One hundred percent of students become part of Lindeman’s caseload. There are significant gang issues in Aldine, so it is not uncommon for students to return to school with ankle bracelets, which must be covered during school. Students and their families enter a contract with Lindeman, looking at root causes of problems and how to avoid recurrence with an eye toward staying in school and graduating. He supports students with documentation in court if necessary. There is a Bridge In/Bridge Out Program designed to help students successfully transition from the alternative school back into the regular school. The local juvenile defenders office visited the alternative school after hearing positive things from students.

Aldine PD OCR Student Reported Arrest Totals

Year	Total
2014-2015	Data not available
2015-2016	Data not available
2016-2017	Data not available
2017-2018	136
2018-2019	104
2019-2020	33
2020-2021	12
2021-2022	41

Transition Plan: Reacclimating students of disciplinary action into the relativeness of school normality requires a review board of sorts. A comprehensive team of both administrators and executive directors review student performance to decide a campus reentry date. Utilizing tailored evaluation plans, administrators create a rapport with students through monthly visitation to District Alternative Educational Placement (DAEP). Campus officers build community relations and intervene on an as-needed basis. Based on improvements in attendance, grades and overall behavior, a recommendation for returning to campus could be made. Abiding by dictated expectations for the next consecutive three weeks, students are released from the DAEP.



Covid: Mental health needs were addressed prior to COVID, but the district has seen an increase in need – from students and staff – since returning to in-person classes. The pandemic created a reversal or halt of progress as more modification to meet the severity in which isolation and stress impacted students was needed.

The district experienced an increase in bad behavior by students in the first 6 to 8 weeks after returning to school in Fall 2021, but this settled down in October. District leaders attribute this “settling down” to the work they’d done on school culture prior to schools closing in March 2020. Realizing that **trauma and grief are the two biggest predictors** of behavior, they were prepared to help students and their families with MTSS and other systems that were familiar to both students and staff.

Sustainability: District administration has worked closely with the school board during this time, keeping it informed of how the strategic plan was implemented throughout the district. It has also made changes to district policies to ensure that progress will not be lost due to changes in staffing. With this strategic plan, the district is projected to have 26,000 less disciplinary referrals compared to the 61,543 referrals during the 2018–2019 school year.

Disproportionality: Aldine ISD is 96% Black and Brown students, but there is still over-identification/disproportionate representation of Black students in special education. Prior to changes in the dress code, these students were frequently written up for violations related to clothing, hair and shaving (the district did not allow beards for students). Since COVID, the dress code policy has relaxed – students are no longer required to wear uniforms. Additionally, IEPs are consulted for special education students BEFORE they are held accountable for any rule infraction. This policy is designed to ensure the adults did their part first.

The administrative team recognizes that making change in an all-Black and Brown district requires functional change – changing the mindset of every teacher who encounters students. Instilling the ideology that our special needs students are general education students first reinforces the application of SEL in all aspects of the school environment. The common denominator across all students in Aldine ISD is poverty, so even the White students are a minority in the district.

