

School Leaders Doing the
Work the Right Way:

Building Walls Between
Schools and the
Justice System

PHOENIX PXU UNION
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

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THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

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: Chad Geston

Number of Students: 28,031

Demographics: 81.7% Hispanic; 8.3% African American; 4.4% White; 2.4% Native American; 1.6% Asian; 1.6% Other

District Type: Urban

Free And Reduced Meals (FARM) Rate: 77.4%

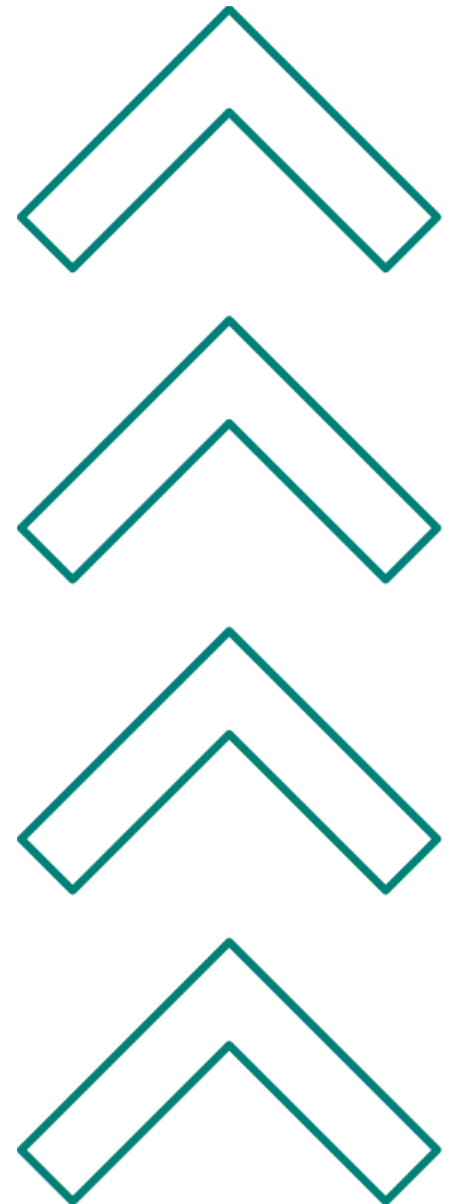
SRO in District: No

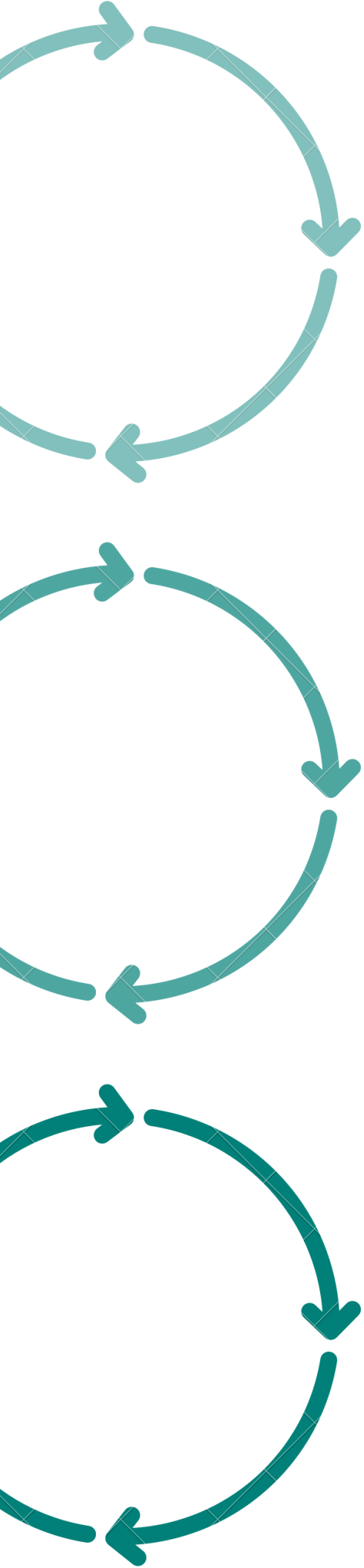
Phoenix Union High School District (PXU): Located in Phoenix, Ariz., PXU was the only high school district profiled as part of this project. The high school district is made up of 13 elementary districts that feed into it and has 11 comprehensive high schools, four small specialty schools, three micro-schools, three support schools and a digital academy. The district has 4,000 employees and covers 220-square miles of Arizona's capital city. The most diverse city of those profiled, Phoenix students speak more than 100 languages and represent 50 Native American tribes.

Catalyst for Change: A change in school board members during the 2013–2014 school year spurred PXU to start making changes in the district. The results of study sessions focused on disproportionality revealed that boys were being suspended at high rates and that Black boys were being suspended at triple the rate of other groups. The district looked at what offenses it suspended for and if they made sense. Data-driven, it changed the handbook and started restorative justice practices, beginning its work with adults who would be most resistant to change.

District leaders piloted restorative justice practices in a school in the 2017–2018 school year. Although, many districts overly concentrated restorative efforts in the consequential side (decrease suspension rates), Phoenix focused primarily on a formal, structured reentry process. It had already begun this work through the utilization of behavior intervention specialists (who worked in the special education department). In addition, student prevention specialists prioritized early intervention in poor behavior and literacy prevention metrics. Additional social workers were hired to meet students' overall needs. Community liaisons were responsible for manning clothing closets and food pantries. Furthermore, understanding the impact or cause of substance use among students (smoking marijuana) was an important concept to consider. This emphasized the need to revisit elements of the code of conduct as self-medicating among students required an alternative response.

In 2018–2019, the district launched a code of conduct committee as it started looking at how to resolve conflict. These efforts were led by a vice principal and Student Prevention Specialists (SPIES). The district looked at similar work on overhauling the code of conduct that was being done in Oakland, Calif., Chicago, Ill., and Denver, Colo. These districts acted as pilots, where the creation of peace rooms, implementation of better mediation practices, and conflict resolution (teacher to student and student to student) were modified.





With an ideology to “resolve the problem in the conflict,” the district considered how to reimplement the sense of community building within the school environment. The overhauled code of conduct, launched in the 2019-2020 school year, paired consequences and accountability with interventions based on root cause analysis. The whole child strategy (social, emotional and physical wellbeing) was at the forefront of these efforts.

Sense of Community While Utilizing Staff: Through a multifaceted approach, PXU creates a sense of community among staff by addressing culture, behavior and practice. This approach is solidified in school structure through the two-year training requirement of new hires. Onboarding includes training in emotional and social learning, including awareness of the district’s core values, vision, mission and brand promise. Teachers receive developmental training in classroom management, relationship-building and best practices in pedagogy. SEL competencies, such as perseverance and resilience-building of students, are also taught.

The Title I program was restructured to better support students and teachers. Striving for coherence and alignment across programs, this alteration repositioned professional, curriculum and resource development efforts.

Cultural awareness classes are part of the regular school curriculum, something unique to PXU. This class introduces different perspectives, empathy and understanding among different ethnic groups. Keeping in mind the preparatory expectations brought on by higher education, the district wanted to enable comprehension of intersectionality’s impact on society. Interestingly, each school in the district creates its own integrated action plan to tailor the strategies to the individual needs specific to the school.

Police Department: PXU had a two-pronged strategy for safety and security in the district. The first strategy launched in 2017, Next Generation Safety and Security Plan, is designed to improve physical and emotional safety across the district. This includes making sure building perimeters are safe and secure (physical) and also training security officers to know students' names (emotional). District security had been arranged through an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) with the city of Phoenix. The district was looking to decrease the number of SROs used, but it reported good outcomes and relationships with SROs. Most recently, SROs had morphed into school safety officers (SSOs), who are off-duty police officers that dealt with major offenses such as firearms on school grounds. Usage of SSOs aligned with the district's holistic approach to law enforcement interactions.

PXU discontinued the IGA with the city for SROs after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. It instead moved to Strategy 2, participatory budgeting with staff, students and parents. This is a process that the district had used previously, but it was the first time it had used participatory budgeting for campus safety. It had \$1.2 million for staff, students and parents to "shark tank" ideas on how to keep campuses safe. The process wasn't easy in a virtual environment without facilitated engagement. Another hurdle was current legislation requiring survey completion at home. This slowed down the democratic process to receive feedback and draft system solutions. The strategy was to have a plan that was fluid and adaptable to district needs from year to year. It included restorative practices, PBIS and MTSS with hearty wraparound services for each student, positive school culture and robust training for security.


Police involved Youth: There is a district team that works on juvenile justice interaction. The district has several alternative schools for students who are justice-involved. These schools are smaller with a student body of 100 to 300. Students are closely monitored, the community is strong and receives a great deal of support.

There is no formal system of communication between the juvenile justice system and the school district. The district relies on communication from families for information when a student is arrested. Police are met with restricted access until communication is received from parents when infringements occur on school grounds. Focused on protecting the student, the district has begun to limit the capacity in which officers operate on school grounds.

The district has an intervention referral system and many justice-involved students may already be on the caseload. Probation officers come to the schools for attendance checks, which is preferred by the families. Arizona state law has some bearing on these interactions. The district has regional social workers, who are licensed clinicians, for those students with serious addiction issues, repeat offences and aggression.

Transition Plan: At enrollment and during their time at the school, students needing wraparound support or more services are identified. Two of the support schools include Bostrom and Desiderata. After completion of one to two semesters at an alternative school, students can return to their home school. From the point of planned reentry, students receive aid from both their counselor and administrator to schedule their return to school.

Covid: PXU had already been doing serious work to overhaul systems in the district, but COVID-19 seemed to be the catalyst to make bolder change, such as not renewing the IGA with the city for SROs. The district had laid much of the groundwork for change prior to the pandemic so that when students returned to in-person classes, schools were able to meet many of their needs because services were already in place, school culture was changing/had changed prior to March 2020 and the district was a trusted member of the community.



Sustainability: Changes in the district started because of the school board changes. Policies and procedures have been solidified/codified by changes to the handbook, code of conduct, and the Next Generation Safety and Security Plan. These changes have been implemented in 21 schools.

Disproportionality: Disproportionality was the root cause of the changes in the district. The board recognized that disproportionality was an issue in the 2013–2014 school year when it recognized the high suspension rate for boys – and that Black boys were being suspended at triple the rate of other students.