

School Leaders Doing the  
Work the Right Way:

Building Walls Between  
Schools and the  
Justice System

ST. LOUIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI



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:** Kelvin Adams (retired 12/22)

**Number of Students:** 19,299

**Demographics:** 78% Black; 0.38% American Indian; 3% Asian; 6% Hispanic; 13% White

**District Type:** Urban

Free And Reduced Meals Rate: CEP (Community Eligibility Program) district – all students eat breakfast and lunch for free

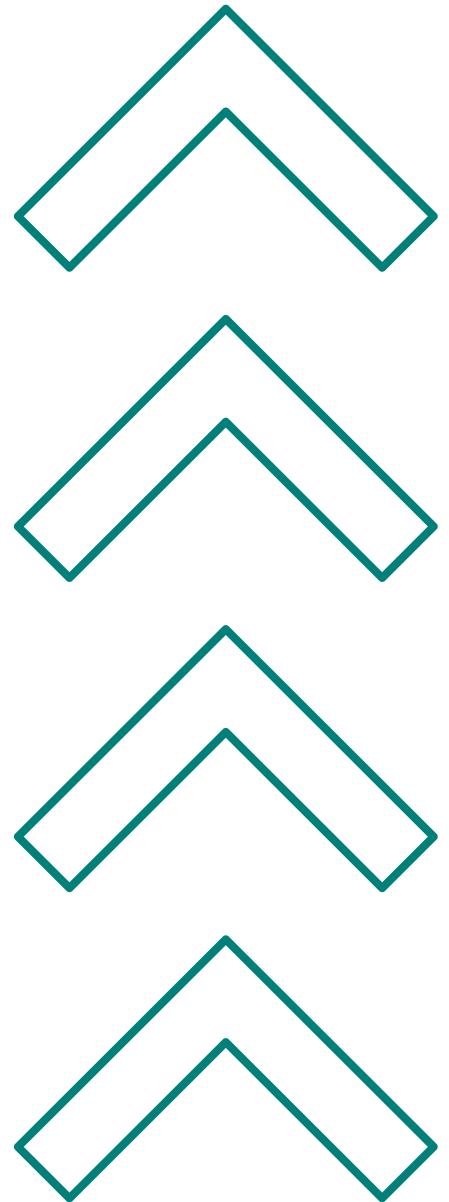
**St. Louis Public Schools:** St. Louis Public Schools is an urban school district of 19,299 students. The district has a predominantly Black student population with 78% of students identifying as Black, while also being very diverse with 11% of students qualifying as English Language Learners (ELL). The student handbook is currently published in seven languages.

St. Louis has a high crime rate, including a high murder rate. This trickles down to schools and impacts students. Much of the violence is affected by state-level policies, such as open carry gun laws. Poverty and gang activity are also issues of concern in the district.

**Catalyst for Change:** The district lost its accreditation in 2007 and had to make several changes to regain it. Accreditation is a process by which individual schools or entire school districts are certified as achieving minimum standards of quality. The district regained accreditation in 2017.

The student handbook was changed to focus on restorative practices linked to infractions instead of suspensions. Over the past 10 years, the district stopped suspending students in Pre-K-2. Elementary and middle school students meet with social workers on restorative practices when needed. High school students work with counselors on restorative practices.

There are social workers and counselors, along with SEL curriculum in all schools. Crisis teams are available to assist as necessary and the district has strong relationships with community providers who are available to meet the needs of students that are beyond what can be provided in schools. The district's mental health plan is in phase one, which is increasing education on and access to mental health services. Fifth-, 7th- and 9th-graders are receiving suicide prevention education provided by community partners. This work is overseen by the clinical consultant, who also provides staff training on issues such as suicide.



**Police Department:** St. Louis PS has its own safety officers, who are part of the district's staff. The district has never had a contract for SROs. St. Louis police did not want to be a presence in schools. Whenever there's a need for police at schools, the police department makes sure that the officer is from the juvenile division, has a working relationship with youth and is trained in restorative justice. The restorative justice model used was developed by students from Northwest High School, as the school was becoming a law academy between 2005 and 2010. However, the police department's gang unit does work in the schools, building rapport between students and officers. These interactions are not punitive in nature.

Current school safety officers are district staff. They are members of the community and went to school in St. Louis themselves. They have varied backgrounds and skill sets in areas such as mental health supports, de-escalation and understanding of an incidence command system. The district was looking for safety officers with patience and even healthcare knowledge to do visitor management, site assessment and develop strong relationships with building principals. Building-level safety officers are unarmed and wear a "uniform" comprised of a polo shirt and khaki pants. Safety officers are fully integrated into buildings and may serve as students' coaches for extracurricular activities. Sergeant-level safety officers are armed and respond to concerns across the district that may require more intervention.

**Police involved Youth:** St. Louis PS has a school inside the juvenile detention center. A social worker serves as the liaison between students and their home schools. Students receive instruction in core subjects (English, math, science, history) so as not to be behind upon returning to their school of origin. While there is no direct communication between juvenile justice and the schools, the social worker bridges the gap, informing schools when students have been detained. Schools are notified by e-mail when a student is released from detention. Upon returning to school, the student meets with a support team (social workers, counselors, administrators) to help him or her reintegrate into the traditional classroom or school setting. Students also have a probation officer, who goes to school weekly to check on their attendance. Probation officers have access to students while they're in school. The average length of stay in detention is 30 days.

**Covid:** COVID-19 impacted school attendance, as students were not logging on to virtual school during the pandemic. The district implemented rapid COVID testing in schools, which helped to bring students back to school for in-person learning. School staff noticed an increase in fights upon the return to school, but that subsided over time.

School safety pivoted in response to COVID-19 and now has a focus on staff mental well-being that did not exist previously.

**Sustainability:** St. Louis has codified policies and procedures to insure the sustainability of its efforts. Additionally, it has 3- to 5-year grants with community partners who are providing counseling and support services for students. Funding for social workers and other staff comes from existing funding sources, not ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds) or ARP (American Rescue Plan) funds.

**Disproportionality:** African American males are disproportionately justice-involved in St. Louis. To combat this problem, the district has created a mentorship program for African American males specifically focused on disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline in the district.

