



RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT AWARENESS, USE, AND PERCEPTIONS OF STATE SCHOOL SAFETY CENTERS: A FRAMEWORK

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This project was supported by Grant #2020-CK-BX-002 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

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Suggested citation: Boal, A., Russo, S., Sutherland, H., Washington, A. Q., Muñoz, E. C., White, S. R., & McKenna, J. (2024). *Recommendations to support awareness, use, and perceptions of state school safety centers: A framework*. WestEd.

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The authors would like to give special thanks and gratitude to Dr. Anthony Petrosino and Mr. William “Bill” Modzeleski for their support in producing this resource. Their support in reviewing and providing feedback on this resource was invaluable.

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Introduction

State School Safety Centers (SSSCs) are common across many states, yet until recently no systematic research had been conducted to assess their structure or the services and supports they provide. Additionally, information has been scarce regarding professionals' awareness and perceptions of SSSCs. With funding from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), WestEd's Justice and Prevention Research Center conducted a national evaluation of SSSCs to address these gaps and identify promising practices and structures. Findings from each phase of this evaluation are available through a series of three reports and accompanying briefs:

- [Report 1](#) and [Brief 1](#): The history, characteristics, and activities of SSSCs
- [Report 2](#) and [Brief 2](#): The structure, services, and products of SSSCs
- [Report 3](#) and [Brief 3](#): Perceptions of SSSC supports and services

This evaluation culminates in a comprehensive examination of all data collected over the course of the study to develop a framework of promising practices by these centers. Our goal in developing this framework is to provide states with evidence-based recommendations to help them establish and improve their SSSCs.

The evaluation team used a holistic approach to identify promising practices. First, we reviewed typical structures, characteristics, activities, supports, and services. Next, we examined feedback from users, focusing on suggestions and recommendations from those engaging with these centers. Finally, our process included identifying and examining centers that stood out due to high levels of awareness, use, and positive perceptions among surveyed superintendents and principals.¹ These exemplary centers were labeled as “bright spots.”

This process led to the identification of several promising practices for structuring, functioning, and providing supports and services within SSSCs. These practices have been compiled into a framework that not only outlines each practice but also highlights exemplar states that use the recommended practices. Such states serve as practical models, demonstrating how SSSCs can implement these practices. These promising practices are organized into **four** categories (see Figure 1).

¹ See Report 3 for more information about the superintendent and principal surveys used to generate this framework.

Figure 1. SSSC Promising Practice Categories



Vision
& Mission



Structure
& Staffing



Supports
& Services



Audience
& Outreach

Vision and Mission

The first set of promising practices is related to the vision and mission of SSSCs. In particular, bright spot SSSCs

- serve as the state’s school safety hub as part of the SSSC mission,
- respond to the needs of interest holders, and
- use data to understand the quality of services and supports.

Details about how to incorporate these recommendations are provided below.

Serve as the State’s School Safety Hub as Part of the SSSC Mission



Universally, bright spot SSSCs viewed being the school safety hub for training and technical assistance (TA) as the primary mission of their work. An organization’s mission both shapes and propels its activities, so integrating an explicit statement about becoming the state’s go-to resource for school safety needs within the mission can help keep this objective at the forefront. As the state’s school safety hub, the SSSC’s strong emphasis on developing and disseminating resources, delivering training, and providing TA clarifies its purpose and may promote greater use of the available supports and services.

Example From the Field: South Dakota State School Safety Center

The main goal of the South Dakota State School Safety Center (SDSSSC)—which is listed on their website and was reiterated by center staff—is to “serve as the core” for information, training, technical support, and resources on school safety. In addition, the SDSSSC aims to make this knowledge available to everyone who might need it, including school faculty and staff, students, parents/guardians, law enforcement, and mental health professionals.

Promising Practice: Serve as the state’s school safety hub as part of the SSSC mission

Respond to the Needs of Interest Holders



Bright spot SSSCs, which had the highest levels of user engagement, tended to bring a responsive lens to their work, including a greater focus on prevention. Such SSSCs described a primary focus on supporting prevention efforts and anticipating future needs in the field while still supporting incident response efforts and compliance with legislation. For example, many bright spot SSSCs reported focusing on the systemic implementation and management of anonymous reporting, gathering feedback from the field to inform what supports are most needed, and adjusting accordingly. An SSSC’s ability to understand and anticipate needs in the field ensures that supports and services are well aligned to these needs and may help to foster deeper engagement from intended users.

Example From the Field: Kentucky Center for School Safety

The Kentucky Center for School Safety (KCSS) prioritizes responsiveness to schools and educators with school safety needs. Providing TA for safe schools is a central pillar of the KCSS mission statement, and center staff identify their primary goal as being “an immediate resource” for any educator with a time-sensitive question or issue. Interest holders appreciated the KCSS’s commitment to swiftly addressing school safety needs, praising the center for its immediate responsiveness and personalized attention when they sought assistance.

Promising Practice: Respond to the needs of interest holders

Use Data to Understand Quality of Services and Supports



Bright spot SSSCs consistently prioritize efforts to solicit feedback, relying on data to understand and gauge the quality of their supports and services. For example, bright spot SSSCs implement training satisfaction surveys to capture participant perceptions of the training's quality and relevance. When compared to other SSSCs, bright spots tend to conduct rigorous research and evaluation. Hiring staff with specialized skills in research and evaluation, which is more common in bright spot SSSCs, likely enhances their capacity for comprehensive assessment. They opt for collecting data to gather comprehensive information about the quality, utility, and impact of supports and services rather than gathering feedback informally. This approach equips such SSSCs with a better understanding of their strengths and with opportunities for improvement, ensuring they can adequately support their intended audience.

Example From the Field: Texas School Safety Center

The Texas School Safety Center (TxSSC) adopts a strong research and evidence-based approach to school safety. With an internal research and evaluation department, the TxSSC contributes to the body of school safety research while evaluating its own services. The TxSSC undertakes research projects focused on various school safety topics, including school policing, behavioral threat assessment, violence prevention, and communicable disease outbreaks. Findings inform their own practices and are disseminated to practitioners in the school safety field. The TxSSC also conducts evaluations following training sessions, summits, and conferences to gauge changes in participant knowledge and their perceptions of the quality of training provided.

Promising Practice: Use data to understand quality of services and supports

Structure and Staffing

The second set of promising practices relates to the structure and staffing of the SSSC. In particular, bright spot SSSCs

- house services in a single agency,
- use diverse funding streams to support SSSC work,
- consider staffing needs carefully to build a sufficient multidisciplinary team, and
- strategize on how best to collaborate with other agencies and organizations.

Additional details about how to incorporate these recommendations are described below.

House SSSCs in a Single Agency



Nearly every SSSC in the United States is housed in a single agency, such as a department of justice (DOJ), department of education (DOE), office of public safety, office of emergency management, or institution of higher education. Users from the minority of states with SSSC ownership split between two agencies or organizations consistently report confusion and suggested consolidation into one location. They believe that housing a center within a single agency would clarify the SSSC's purpose and role as well as streamline support. The location of an SSSC within the state does not appear to differentiate bright spot SSSCs from other SSSCs so long as the SSSC is housed in a single agency or organization. Regardless of where SSSCs are housed, collaboration across relevant agencies and organizations is valuable for ensuring a coherent approach to improving school safety in the state.

Example From the Field: Maryland Center for School Safety

The Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS) was established in 2013 as an independent unit within the State Police. In 2018, legislation relocated the MCSS to an independent unit within the Maryland State Department of Education. Rather than split the center's ownership and responsibilities between the two departments, the MCSS remained intact under one agency and maintains coordinated efforts among the various state departments involved in school safety.

Promising Practice: House SSSCs in a single agency

Diversify Funding Streams to Support SSSC Work



SSSCs that generate the highest levels of user engagement draw on a variety of funding streams to support their work. These include federal and state grant opportunities, state appropriations, and nongovernmental funds. Multiple funding sources uniquely differentiate bright spot states; other states often rely on fewer funding sources. Federal grants supporting bright spot SSSC work came from the United States Department of Justice (USDOJ) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Within the USDOJ, bright spot SSSCs applied for and received funding for grants from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and NIJ. Bright spot SSSCs also commonly acquired state grant funding from agencies such as their state department of health and human services (HHS), DOJ, DOE, or governor's office. In addition to grant funding, bright spot SSSCs often received state appropriations to drive their work, which provides a relatively stable funding stream that is not reliant on competitive grants. Finally, several bright spot SSSCs described partnering with universities or foundations to acquire additional funding. Together, this suggests that when SSSCs obtain varied sources of funding to support their work, they may be better equipped to successfully engage intended users.

Example From the Field: Florida State School Safety Center

Florida's SSSC is funded through a variety of sources, including state appropriations and state and federal grant funds. The center operates under the Department of Education's budget, which covers staff positions in addition to the three funded by the state legislature when the center was established. Florida's SSSC is one of the few centers that administer grant programs to school safety entities in their states. Although specific grants are funded by the state legislature, additional funding for grants and center activities comes from grant-writing efforts. The center's grant-writing strategy includes pursuing funding beyond a narrow school safety focus, including areas such as discipline and mental health.

Promising Practice: Diversify funding streams to support SSSC work

Carefully Consider Staffing to Build a Sufficient Multidisciplinary Team



Compared to other SSSCs, bright spot SSSCs tended to employ dedicated staff with a wide variety of backgrounds and areas of expertise. The number of full-time staff employed by bright spot SSSCs varied, but nearly all had at least five full-time staff members completely dedicated to the SSSC. The backgrounds and expertise of bright spot SSSC staff extend beyond traditional school safety backgrounds such as law enforcement, criminal justice, threat assessment, and emergency management. In addition to employing staff with expertise in these customary areas, bright spot SSSCs also employed staff with expertise in other relevant fields, including education, mental and behavioral health, and research and evaluation. School safety spans multiple fields, and SSSCs that employed a dedicated team with wide-ranging areas of expertise demonstrated higher levels of user engagement.

Example From the Field: Colorado School Safety Resource Center

The Colorado School Safety Resource Center (CSSRC) comprises 6–10 full-time staff in various roles across various school safety domains, such as emergency response outreach, school outreach, child sexual abuse prevention, physical safety, and psychological safety. In addition to school safety knowledge, the core team brings a wide variety of expertise to their center's work. Alongside more conventional backgrounds such as law enforcement and emergency management, center staff bring experience in law, clinical psychology, school counseling, research, and evaluation. This blend of backgrounds ensures that the CSSRC brings expertise on a wide range of topics to the state's school safety work.

Promising Practice: Carefully consider staffing to build a sufficient multidisciplinary team

Strategically Collaborate With Other Agencies and Organizations



Many agencies and organizations work to create safe and supportive school environments for both students and staff. For SSSCs, being aware of other organizations doing related work within their state and actively seeking collaboration can be crucial to mission-driven efforts of improving the safety of schools. Rather than working in a silo, SSSCs may benefit from developing partnerships with outside organizations to leverage their work and communication channels. Bright spot SSSCs work with partners to promote resources and events through existing outreach methods. Examples include sharing training opportunities on another agency's listserv, cosponsoring trainings, and drawing on the expertise of other organizations to strengthen their own work. Strategic collaboration not only provides SSSCs with a wider reach and a more robust bench of expertise but can also help ensure alignment across guidance and recommendations provided by different organizations and agencies throughout the state.

Example From the Field: Vermont School Safety Center

Before the Vermont School Safety Center (VSSC) was established, a group of individuals from diverse state agencies, all of whom had a vested interest in school safety, regularly gathered to collaboratively work toward addressing the safety needs of schools in the state. This group included representatives from the Agency of Human Services, the Department of Mental Health, the state's Principal and Superintendent Associations, the School Boards Association, and more. This spirit of partnership continued when the VSSC was established in 2016 as a formal acknowledgment of the collaborative effort between Vermont's Department of Public Safety and Agency of Education. At the same time, the diverse group became formally established as the School Crisis Planning Team and continues to provide guidance and recommendations to the VSSC.

Promising Practice: Strategically collaborate with other agencies and organizations

Supports and Services

The third set of promising practices is related to the supports and services offered by the SSSC. In particular, bright spot SSSCs

- offer a sufficient amount and variety of supports and services and
- are knowledgeable and active in understanding school safety legislation and its implications.

Additional details about how to incorporate these recommendations are described below.

Offer a Sufficient Amount and Variety of Supports and Services



A notable pattern among bright spot SSSCs is the significant volume of training and TA engagements they offer—exceeding those offerings by most other SSSCs. Bright spot SSSCs offered an average of 135 training programs and 565 TA instances within a year’s time, compared to an average of 90 training programs and 282 TA instances across all SSSCs. Insufficient offerings may prevent potential SSSC users from learning about or accessing services. Frequent training and TA delivery are essential for engaging intended users. Recognizing that such efforts are time-intensive, bright spot SSSCs allocate substantial amounts of training and TA.

Bright spot SSSCs also provide grant funding to districts and schools in their states and assist schools and districts with compliance requirements. In turn, this creates additional avenues for intended users to become aware of the center. Bright spot SSSCs not only deliver a greater volume of supports but also deliver a wider variety of types of supports. Users consistently reported wanting more comprehensive services across a broader range of topics. This feedback was consistent across all SSSCs, indicating the need for every SSSC to consider expanding their support offerings to better serve user needs.

Example From the Field: Florida Office of Safe Schools

Established in the wake of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas tragedy in Parkland, Florida’s SSSC provides extensive services to meet the needs of the school safety community. In addition to numerous training opportunities, including annual school safety specialist trainings, the center reported spending more than half of its staff time providing direct TA on topics such as emergency management, threat assessment, and school violence.

Promising Practice: Offer a sufficient amount and variety of supports and services

Be Knowledgeable and Active in Understanding School Safety Legislation and Its Implications



SSSCs bring a wealth of knowledge about school safety policy, practice, and implications. As policymakers grapple with developing and refining school safety legislation, SSSCs can play an important role in providing information and resources to ensure the creation of sound policy. They can provide content expertise and thought partnership, aiding policymakers in understanding what is feasible and reasonable in a school setting and what is not. Additionally, they can clarify what is supported by school safety research and best practices and what is not. SSSCs can also outline the implications and the possible unintended consequences of a given policy.

Beyond offering thought partnership and content expertise, SSSCs can provide data to inform policy decisions, particularly when SSSCs are conducting their own research and evaluation to understand the school safety statistics and needs. Moreover, SSSCs may play a key role in interpreting policy for districts and schools. Those working on the ground in education may not have a clear understanding of how school safety policies impact the day-to-day operations and procedures of their school. SSSCs have a unique opportunity to build relationships and bring value by bridging the gap of translating policy into actionable steps that education systems and educators can take.

Example From the Field: Texas School Safety Center

The TxSSC actively engages with legislators when called upon to provide expert testimony by acting as subject matter experts to review proposed legislation. Furthermore, the TxSSC has a governor-appointed Board of Directors whose members are trained and serve as advocates for school safety. The Board of Directors also produces a biennial report to the governor, the legislature, the State Board of Education, and the Texas Education Agency. This report incorporates the TxSSC's findings on school safety and security, as well as strategic planning initiatives. Additionally, the TxSSC disseminates legislative knowledge through a series of legislative session update videos available on its website, offering districts and interest holders timely information on legislative requirements, implications, and guidance pertaining to school safety.

Promising Practice: Be knowledgeable and active in understanding school safety legislation and its implications

Audience and Outreach

The fourth set of promising practices is related to the SSSC's intended audience and outreach strategies. In particular, bright spot SSSCs

- focus on a wider variety of audiences beyond district and school leaders and
- engage target audiences through technology.

Additional details about how to incorporate these recommendations are described below.

Focus on a Wider Variety of Audiences Beyond District and School Leaders



While many SSSCs concentrate their efforts on district staff and school administrators, those identified as bright spots take a more inclusive approach. They include other members of the school and safety community, such as school board members, law enforcement, first responders, parents, and students. This broader scope enables these SSSCs to tailor their services and supports to a more diverse range of needs and perspectives, resulting in a more comprehensive approach to school safety.

This strategy of engaging with a broader audience is not only inclusive but also strategically beneficial. For example, since school boards often approve policies and spending, improving their awareness about the SSSC and equipping them with school safety resources can enable them to make more informed decisions related to this area. Such an approach provides more touchpoints with different members of the community to increase opportunities for visibility, engagement, and relationship-building.

Example From the Field: South Dakota State School Safety Center

A primary tenet of the SDSSSC's philosophy is a multidisciplinary, holistic approach to school safety. To achieve this, the SDSSSC engages educators, administrators, counselors, mental health professionals, and law enforcement throughout the state to create a network of experts in diverse fields and ultimately promote safe learning environments. Unlike many other centers, the SDSSSC shared that their main audiences go beyond district and school-based staff to also include students and parents. Using the expertise and networks of the diverse partners they engage, the SDSSC works to encourage and empower students and parents and ensure schools are centers for learning and growth.

Promising Practice: Focus on a wider variety of audiences beyond district and school leaders

Engage Target Audiences Through Technology



Bright spot SSSCs leverage technology to ensure their centers are well represented, whereas other SSSCs tend to rely on word of mouth to spread awareness about their centers. Bright spot SSSCs tend to use social media more frequently to circulate resources, announce training, and share information. Many of them also have websites that are visually appealing, are easy to navigate, and house a vast amount of information and resources, making it easier for those looking for school safety resources to find what they need.

SSSC users emphasize the importance of user-friendly websites, noting that websites lacking adequate functionality can create a barrier to accessing needed resources. Beyond leveraging technology, bright spot SSSCs are proactive in engaging their audiences through conferences and training. In summary, bright spot SSSCs invest in developing a well-designed, accessible website and implementing strategies to build awareness of their center via social media.

Example From the Field: New York State Center for School Safety

The New York State Center for School Safety utilizes its online platforms and communication channels to raise awareness about the center and its resources. Interest holders described discovering the center through a straightforward Google search that led them directly to the website. Additionally, they reported receiving information about the center through various technologically driven communication channels, such as online newsletters and emails.




Promising Practice: Engage target audiences through technology

Factors Unrelated to Awareness, Use, and Perceptions of SSSCs

This framework provides information about the structures and approaches that encourage user engagement with SSSCs that yield the following: high awareness of the SSSC; high use of the SSSC; and positive perceptions about the quality, usefulness, and impact of the SSSC. However, there are several factors that do not appear to influence user engagement. These may be areas of flexibility in which SSSCs may vary based on the unique needs and contexts of their states without sacrificing engagement with intended users.

Among intended users, factors that did not emerge as being related to awareness, use, or perceptions include the year the SSSC began, the agency or organization where the SSSC is situated, and the content of state school safety legislation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Factors That Do Not Strongly Influence Awareness, Use, and Perceptions of SSSCs

Factors	
	<p>Year the SSSC began</p> <p>Both new and established SSSCs had similar levels of intended user engagement, suggesting that an SSSC does not have to have existed for many years to be successful and that the longevity of an SSSC does not necessarily equate to more user engagement.</p>
	<p>Agency or organization where the SSSC is situated</p> <p>SSSCs can successfully engage intended users regardless of where they are housed in the state, such as the DOE, the DOJ, the emergency management office, or an institution of higher education.</p>
	<p>Content of state school safety legislation</p> <p>SSSCs are informed by various laws that may require specific areas of focus, but the legislative areas of focus did not differentiate states with higher and lower levels of engagement.</p>

Moving Forward

While additional research is needed to determine the effectiveness of SSSCs in enhancing school safety, an important first step is ensuring that they operate in ways aligned with early evidence regarding the factors that could promote their usage, visibility, and favorable views of their quality. This framework provides guidance aligned with these factors to support implementation by SSSCs. Future studies should focus research on evaluating the impacts of well-implemented SSSCs on school safety outcomes and are warranted to examine whether the use of SSSCs achieves the ultimate goal of ensuring student and staff safety.