

# Service Users' Perceptions of State School Safety Center Supports & Services

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## Background

Tragedies such as those that transpired in 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida and Santa Fe High School in Texas once again brought school safety to the forefront for the federal government, states, and local organizations. More recent tragedies in Oxford, Michigan, and Uvalde, Texas, have intensified that concern. Despite national data indicating that fatalities at schools due to homicide among children ages 5–18 are rare and that other indicators of school safety are improving (Irwin et al., 2022), these high-casualty massacres have substantially elevated national concern about whether youths are safe in school.

One approach used to maintain an organized and consolidated effort at the state level to address school safety is the creation of state school safety centers (SSSCs). SSSCs generally have a mission to be the centralized state unit that provides a wide range of services to enhance the safety and security of schools in their jurisdictions (National Crime Prevention Council, 2020). Although trends show an increased interest at both the state and federal level to establish and support such centers (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2019; Carlton et al., 2017), more information is needed to better understand how these centers should operate and what leads to a successful SSSC.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- » This paper is part of an evaluation aiming to illuminate the history, characteristics, structure, activities, and perceived impacts of state school safety centers (SSSCs) across the United States.
- » The results reported here are based on interviews with SSSC stakeholders and a survey of superintendents and principals in states with an SSSC.
- » Key findings:
  - The majority of district and school leaders were aware of their SSSCs; however, superintendents report greater awareness and use of their SSSCs compared to principals.
  - Online resources, training, and technical assistance are the most used SSSC supports.
  - Regardless of the type of services they use, stakeholders have positive perceptions of the services they receive from their SSSCs.
  - Although stakeholders have positive perceptions of their SSSCs, there are opportunities for improvement that may increase the value of centers for those they aim to serve.

## Goals of This Evaluation Study

Given the interest in SSSCs and their potential role in improving safety, WestEd's Justice & Prevention Research Center (JPRC) is conducting the first empirical evaluation focused on SSSCs. The lack of information currently available to inform the development of high-quality centers underscores the significance of this research. The goals of this 3-year evaluation are to

- » document the history of SSSCs;
- » describe the characteristics, practices, structures, and activities of SSSCs;
- » assess the perceived impact of SSSCs;
- » develop a framework outlining promising structures and practices to facilitate the development and improvement of SSSCs; and
- » guide future research to examine the impacts and outcomes associated with SSSCs.

This brief is the third in a series highlighting findings from each of the data collection efforts associated with the JPRC's evaluation of SSSCs. The [initial brief](#) from this study aimed to identify which states established SSSCs, which states previously had centers but discontinued them, and which states never had centers (McKenna et al., 2021). For states that reported having an SSSC, the study examined the characteristics of these centers, including their structure within their state governments, funding mechanisms, staffing, and the range of products and activities in which the centers engage. Finally, the brief explored how different states define SSSCs, aiming to develop a uniform definition for the field. The complete report can be accessed [online from the federal Office of Justice Programs](#).

The [second brief](#) from this study used data from in-depth interviews with SSSC directors and detailed activity data for a 1-year period to describe the characteristics, practices, structures, and services of current SSSCs. The aim was to examine variation in SSSC

landscape, structure, and activities (McKenna et al., 2022). Findings indicated that most state legislation governing SSSCs is focused on emergency management. These legislative requirements, coupled with SSSC operations, significantly influence the services offered by SSSCs. Additionally, SSSCs adopt diverse staffing models, ensuring that their staff's expertise aligns with requirements outlined in state legislation. Finally, SSSCs likely require diverse funding sources for their work, and many deliver services remotely. The full report can be accessed online from the [WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center website](#).

This brief centers on the perceptions of intended users of SSSCs. To gain a deeper understanding of stakeholders' awareness, utilization, and perspectives toward SSSCs, this brief draws on data from a survey of superintendents and principals in each state with an operational SSSC. Additionally, it incorporates interviews with various stakeholders engaged with SSSCs. The aim of both the interviews and surveys was to collect data on the perceptions of SSSC service users, focusing specifically on the quality and impact of the services. This summary presents the results of these interviews and surveys, highlighting each participant's awareness of their state's SSSC, their most used supports, and their perceptions of the center's impact on school safety within their state.

## Methodology

As mentioned above, this brief uses data from a survey of superintendents and principals in states with SSSCs and interviews with key stakeholders involved in school safety efforts.

To create the survey sample, the WestEd team compiled statewide email lists for superintendents and principals in each of the 30 states with active SSSCs identified earlier in the study. For most states, the team compiled lists using publicly available information from state, district, and school websites. In states where information was not publicly available, formal

requests for information were submitted to state departments of education, resulting in obtainment of complete lists. For the remaining states without publicly available information, the team purchased email lists from a reputable third-party organization.

Sample sizes for each state were established using sampling parameters to create a representative sample across the 30 states. The resulting potential sample size across all states totaled 4,468 overall contacts, with 1,836 superintendents and 2,632 principals. After adjusting for bounced emails, the final potential sample size decreased to 4,167, with 1,724 superintendents and 2,443 principals.

The overall response rate for all contacts was 20 percent.<sup>1</sup> Response rates for the superintendent and principal surveys were 26 percent and 15 percent, respectively. All 30 states and their respective SSSCs were represented, to varying degrees, in the final data set.

The research team developed and administered the superintendent and principal surveys utilizing Qualtrics. These surveys incorporated multiple-choice items and optional text responses for three items. The superintendent and principal surveys were nearly identical, differing only in terminologies—*districts* for superintendents and *schools* for principals. Each survey was divided into five broad sections: (a) Demographics, (b) Awareness of the State School Safety Center, (c) Perceptions of the Overall Impacts of State School Safety Center Work, (d) Engagement with State School Safety Center Activities, and (e) Use and Perceived Impacts of State School Safety Center Activities. The data from the stakeholder surveys were analyzed using primarily descriptive statistics.

To identify potential interview participants, the research team employed a multistep approach. First, SSSC directors in the 30 states with operational SSSCs were contacted via email. Each director was requested to provide contact information

for individuals who worked closely with their center, specifically

- » three to five individuals (e.g., district or school partners, superintendents and principals, law enforcement officers) who engaged with the center's services;
- » one state policymaker engaged in school safety work;
- » one state educational agency representative engaged in school safety work;
- » one state department of justice representative engaged in school safety work; and
- » one representative from the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the state school resource officer association, the National Association of School Safety and Law Enforcement Officials (NASSLEO), or a similar organization.

Directors from 23 states provided contact information for at least one stakeholder, resulting in the identification and contact of 165 potential interview participants. In total, WestEd conducted 57 stakeholder interviews, representing 34.5 percent of identified contacts from 19 states. Some interviewees were excluded from the analytic sample due to their insufficient awareness of their SSSCs, resulting in a final analysis sample of 51 interview transcripts. These transcripts comprised stakeholders from 17 states, categorized as high-end users ( $n = 41$ ), state education agency representatives ( $n = 4$ ), representatives from NASRO/NASSLEO or similar organizations ( $n = 3$ ), state department of justice representatives ( $n = 2$ ), and a state policymaker ( $n = 1$ ). Interviews occurred between September 2022 and March 2023.

The interview protocol encompassed areas such as awareness of the SSSC, utilization of it, perceived impacts of SSSC activities, and strengths and opportunities for improvement. To analyze the interview data, the WestEd research team engaged in thematic content analysis of interview notes.

<sup>1</sup> This response rate is typical of other large online survey efforts (Wu et al., 2022).

## Findings



***The majority of district and school leaders were aware of their SSSCs; however, superintendents report greater awareness and use of their SSSCs compared to principals.***

To enhance school safety through SSSCs, it is crucial that their intended users are not only aware of their existence but also recognize them as valuable resources. In examination of a random sample of superintendents and principals in states with operational SSSCs, WestEd discovered that a substantial majority were not only aware of their states' centers but had also actively utilized their centers' services in the past year. This trend was particularly pronounced among superintendents, the vast majority of whom reported both awareness and utilization of their SSSCs.

These findings highlight the primary audience for SSSCs. Among district and school leaders, a higher proportion of district leaders appear to be informed of and use their SSSCs (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Proportion of Surveyed Superintendents and Principals Reporting Awareness of Their SSSCs**



This raises questions about whether SSSCs should reevaluate their intended target audiences and consider expanding their outreach efforts to ensure that school leaders are equally aware of the valuable support they offer.

Future investigations could include additional stakeholders, such as teachers, to gain deeper insights into whether those directly involved with classroom teaching are aware of and use the supports offered by SSSCs.



***Online resources, training, and technical assistance are the most used SSSC supports.***

Although a subset of SSSCs engage in compliance activities and offer grant funding to districts and schools, WestEd's research indicates that these are not the predominant forms of support that district and school leaders receive. Instead, at both district and school levels, SSSCs assume primarily a guidance role. They offer resources, engage in thought partnerships, and facilitate professional learning to enhance the knowledge and skill sets of educational leaders (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Stakeholder Use of SSSC Services**



This finding makes sense given the findings from the second brief generated by this study, which focuses on the structure and activities of SSSCs. Surveys of SSSC directors revealed that most SSSCs disseminate resources and deliver training and technical assistance and fewer provide supports related to compliance and grant administration (McKenna et al., 2022). Thus, the most used supports are also those most commonly made available by SSSCs. This suggests that stakeholders are using the available supports, particularly online resources and training.

Given that the use of these types of supports is high, ensuring the quality and alignment of these resources with current school safety needs is of paramount importance.



***Regardless of the type of services they use, stakeholders have positive perceptions of the services they receive from their SSSCs.***

Across all service types, stakeholders consistently rated the services they receive as easy to access, useful, of high quality, aligned with safety needs, and valuable in making safety work more comprehensive. Across 550 survey respondents who use their SSSCs, most agreed that their SSSCs support them to meet state safety requirements and best practices (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Overall Perceptions of the Quality of SSSCs**

Statement		Average rating
	The way in which the center offers its resources and services is accessible for schools/districts.	3.8
	The center assists in improving the overall safety of schools/districts in their state.	3.8
	The center adequately supports schools/districts in their state in meeting state safety requirements.	3.7
	The center adequately supports schools/districts in their state in meeting safety best practices.	3.7

Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 **Strongly Disagree** to 5 **Strongly Agree**.

According to interviews, informational resources and guidance, training, and thought partnership are viewed as especially high in quality and value for informing school safety work, with appreciation for SSSCs providing supports in a relevant and timely manner using staff who are responsive and have appropriate expertise (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Proportion of Interviewees Reporting Favorable Ratings of SSSC Quality**



Collectively, the findings regarding the quality of SSSC services are indicative of the positive regard these centers hold in their respective states. However, it is worth noting that nearly one third of survey respondents expressed a neutral stance when asked about the extent to which their centers adequately support schools/districts in meeting state safety requirements and adhering to safety best practices. This suggests that there may be an opportunity for improvement in ensuring that services align seamlessly with state safety requirements and encompass best practices moving forward. The next portion of this study will examine the relationship between structures and activities of SSSCs and stakeholder perceptions. This will illuminate whether specific ways of organizing SSSCs and types of supports are associated with increased awareness, use, and perceived quality of SSSCs.



***Although stakeholders have positive perceptions of their SSSCs, there are opportunities for improvement that may increase the value of centers for those they aim to serve.***

As new SSSCs are developed and existing SSSCs are refined, areas for improvement identified by stakeholders should be considered to ensure centers are positioned to meet school safety needs in their states.

Common suggestions for improvement included increasing the number of SSSC staff to increase center capacity; improving SSSC websites for increased user-friendliness and easier navigation; refining existing SSSC resources to enhance readability (e.g., summaries, clear organization, bullet points); increasing outreach and marketing efforts to promote greater awareness of SSSC supports; and adding new supports related particularly to threat assessment, mental health, and training of new district and school leaders (e.g., a “boot camp” for those unfamiliar with school safety).

Additionally, in the few states where the SSSC is housed in multiple agencies, stakeholders emphasized the potential benefits of centralizing the center under one agency to streamline the state school safety resources. However, it is crucial to recognize that while SSSCs should consider these opportunities for improvement and incorporate changes based on this feedback, some of the suggested changes may necessitate the involvement of policymakers and agency leadership. For instance, legislative action or political initiatives might be required to consolidate centers into one agency or secure funding to hire more staff.



## Next Steps

To further advance the findings of this study, the JPRC's evaluation will culminate in a promising practices framework. This framework will delineate optimal SSSC structures, characteristics, and activities that prove most beneficial and impactful for meeting the needs of school safety constituents, including district and school leaders. Drawing upon the information gathered throughout the evaluation, including findings outlined in each brief in the series thus far, the framework will aim to provide valuable guidance for the ongoing enhancements of SSSCs.

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Suggested citation: Boal, A., Russo, S., Washington, A. Q., White, S., Muñoz, E. C., Sutherland, H., & McKenna, J. M. (2024). *Service users' perceptions of state school safety center supports & services*. WestEd.



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