

Educator Safety Task Force: Stories and Insights

Speaker 1: My story begins on Halloween, October 31st of 2024. We had a student coming into the school, very escalated, very upset, which was quite normal for him to come in very dysregulated. He took the student down and started beating the other student. I just wanted to keep the other student safe, and so I, with the help of a few of my paras, were able to pull him back so they could get the other student safe. He took me by the head and slammed me down. He headbutted me. As I tried to get away, he kicked me, and I went over a desk onto the ground. He continued to be over me, threatening me. Luckily, help was able to come at that point. After the incident, I sustained a pretty significant head injury, concussion, and a broken tailbone that kept me out of work for about a month. Definitely lots of emotional stress and trauma. I'm still going to therapy for my mental health, along with my physical health. I'm still recovering.

Laura Caro: Okay, hi. I'm Laura Caro, and I am the executive director of Faster Colorado.

Dustin G.: My name is Dustin G, and I serve as the Board Certified Behavior Analyst for Pueblo School District 70.

Brent Rekman: My name is Brent Rekman, and I am the executive director at the Academy of Charter Schools in Westminster.

Jamie Montoya Smith: My name is Jamie Montoya Smith; I'm the Mental Health Services Coordinator for Harrison School District in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Marcia Ronak: Marcia Ronak, I am a National Board Certified Teacher, teaching kindergarten at Sagebrush Elementary in Cherry Creek Schools.

Chris Zimmerman: My name is Chris Zimmerman. I am a principal at Cimarron Middle School in Douglas County School District.

Trisha Van Horson: My name is Trisha Van Horson, and I am a social worker in the Poudre School District in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Speaker 2: One thing that stands out to me about my participation in this task force is the truly diverse membership from all over the state. We had paraprofessionals, we had teachers, we had administrators. There were representatives from the school level, from the district level, from CDE, and even community-based partners. Everyone came together with a genuine concern for educator well-being and grappled honestly with the need to both put students first and find meaningful ways to improve educator support.

Speaker 3: The overall process of how this committee came together was really inspiring. We had individuals from our community, from our schools, our school districts. We had groups that were on here from different facilities across this state. To pull all the voices together with a diverse group like this to give recommendations on a very complex issue was amazing. To hear voices from people all over the state, to hear strategy of what works and what doesn't work, to hear what is going on in our schools on a daily basis—it was amazing. So, to participate in something like this as a statewide task force, I really feel like the diverse group came together and put forth some solutions that will benefit schools for years to come.

Speaker 4: One of the really important takeaways that I think is important for people here in the state of Colorado, but really my neighbors, the people in my community, I want them to know is that we had a lot of voices at the table. That included students, that included parents, that also included paraeducators and teachers and frontline mental health providers, but also individuals who work in school safety and security, who understand the role of school resource officers and administrators—both building-level administrators and our district-level administrators. I fundamentally believe that the recommendations that are coming forward truly represent the perspectives of a majority of Coloradans. I think that's what I'm most proud of, is that the time was taken to include as many perspectives and points of view so that we could come to the table with common sense and really meaningful recommendations for schools within Colorado, no matter what the size of the school district or location.

Speaker 5: Things that this task force provides are a breadth and a depth of voices from across the continuum of education. There are teachers like myself, there are admin from a variety of different schools. We even had a student who was on a couple of our sessions to add a student voice to it. We had a parent, we had people from the state level, we had people from the district level. I think all of those members bring a sort of a well-rounded voice to our work and what we did. Also, just as a teacher, being able to listen as we created these breakout sessions and different groups, subcommittees, being able to listen to a subcommittee from an area that I very rarely get to have a conversation or be a participant in a conversation – in terms of, I think one of the times we had law enforcement talking and listening to their perspective of how they address school safety and how they approach interacting with teachers who have been assaulted or who are in a place where they need to reach out to someone, was fascinating to me. I think the more committees and the more task forces that can be created to add voices like that, we will be able to come up with solutions that are proactive instead of reactive, and they can address all parts of our state, not just the

ones that have the loudest voices or the most members, but we can impact all of the children that we have in Colorado.

Speaker 6: The Educator Safety Task Force is a timely step forward, and I appreciate your commitment to understanding the realities we face. As is often the case in any large organization, there's a gap between what is seen at the administrative level and what's experienced on the ground. I hope my perspective helps inform meaningful and lasting solutions. Thank you for this opportunity.

Speaker 7 (Marcia Ronak?): One of the things that surprised me the most about this work was just how wide-ranging the issues were, how wide-ranging the adults and the people that are involved in these types of incidences can be, and just the wide range of all the elements that come into play when we talk about educator safety. I work in a suburban district, I work in Cherry Creek. It's very large, and we have a very comprehensive safety plan. Listening, and there's a part of my head that knows that that is a unicorn in our state, or we are very fortunate to have that in our state. I have done some work with some educators in rural districts, and I know that they face challenges that I will never see as a Creek teacher. But listening to the wide range of supports that districts do or don't have – they have a superintendent who might be the principal, the bus driver, and the superintendent all at the same time. That was just shocking to me to see that they are dealing with the exact same issues that we are with less resources, or they have to get more creative about how they're doing things.

Speaker 8: One of the things I found really surprising in the group discussions, because my work involves a very different part of school safety, is I was completely shocked by the number of school staff members who are experiencing violence at the hands of students. It's just something that wasn't a part of anything that I was an expert at or had studied. So getting to know the individuals on the task force and just the different things that had happened was rather heartbreaking, and I was so surprised that it's not part of what everybody out there knows goes on.

Speaker 9: Another thing that I thought was very interesting was the sheer number of people who interact with students on a daily basis and try to keep educators safe. It might be a law enforcement person, it might just be a mental health person, it could be anybody. It could be the teacher, it could be the teacher next door. The fact that there are just so many different ways to address this problem is heartening and gives me a lot of hope for different creative solutions that we come up with in places that do not have the resources or aren't able to get there in time. So that was very encouraging. I thought that I found most surprising in the research and group discussions was just the amount

of difficulties that educators are having with tough students, and in some of these difficulties, our staff members are getting hurt.

Speaker 10: Finally, I think the one thing that surprised me the most as a teacher was the number of teachers who have been impacted by an incident from a student multiple times, not just once. Listening and reading to some of the responses, again, just all over the place, ranging from just verbal disrespect to physical altercations and physical things being thrown at them. That was shocking to see, in addition to their ability to feel protected or feel safe in replying or safe in reporting, and not being worried about losing their job. That made my heart clench a little, thinking about someone who might be worried about protecting a student and then also having to protect themselves at the same time.

Speaker 11: What I was most inspired by is getting to know so many different school staff members and educators across the state. In the work that I do, we are very focused on one thing, and that is training, and I don't get a lot of time to sit and talk to and listen to the other things that go on in schools and really how many similarities there are between teachers at different levels in different parts of the state, and between urban and rural and that sort of thing. So it was just really a great experience that has really changed me forever, to hear all the stories of everyone and the fact that they really want this problem to go away. They want kids to be better, and the sharing of best practices and how different people have solved these problems that other people could pick up on was really very inspiring for me.

Speaker 12: I was encouraged and inspired by the group's ability to come together and collaborate over a really hard topic. The way that we worked through the difficult conversations and were able to come up with some ideas and ways that we can support our staff across the state of Colorado was absolutely phenomenal. The people, not just in our main group but also in the subgroups, had really deep conversations multiple times, to where we were able to come together and also get with our colleagues outside of these meetings to gather as much information as possible to make informed decisions.

Speaker 13: One thing I found encouraging about the process is the clear consensus I felt about the significance of this challenge and the strong desire on the part of everyone involved to work towards finding meaningful ways to address it. My experience with the Educator Safety Task Force, it was very valuable to me to be able to bring that to my staff members, just knowing that there's somebody out there advocating for them, knowing that there's hope, knowing that they really have somebody on their side means the absolute world.

Speaker 14: My message is, even for those of us who work with the highest level of need in our school district, we have kids that have such significant needs that we are unable to help. Again, these are students with significant trauma; none of that is their fault. However, we are unable to give them the amount of support that they really need. So my message is just we have to give the appropriate resources to the students that are coming into our schools, just for safety for everyone.

Dustin G.: As the sole BCBA across 22 schools, I work closely with the Exceptional Student Services department and have a broad view of our district's strengths and growing challenges. Over the past five years, we've seen a steady increase in students needing behavioral support, whether that's through IEPs, 504s, or other interventions, alongside a rise in high-intensity behaviors. Unfortunately, our capacity to meet these needs has only declined, especially since a key grant expired two years ago, resulting in the loss of many essential paraprofessionals. The absence of this support has created a ripple effect: unmet student needs, classroom disruptions, and overwhelmed staff members. Despite the dedication of ESS staff, counselors, and administrators, the strain is impacting our ability to fulfill these IEPs, putting both students and the district at risk. Staff are often placed in impossible situations, having to choose between supporting individual students or managing classroom-wide needs. Many lack the necessary training in behavioral management and understanding relevant laws, which is simply unsafe and unsustainable. Burnout is becoming increasingly common, and it's progressively more difficult to recruit qualified staff. Things are in dire need of change. While administrators recognize the need for more training, especially in de-escalation and behavior management, limited staffing and time make it difficult to implement. There's just simply not enough time in the day for training. Also, paraprofessionals who work most closely with our high-need students are often left out of these professional development days altogether. My intent here is not just to raise concerns, but to advocate for change. With better training and a modest increase in support, I feel as though we can make true progress. There is an urgent need for expanded behavioral programs, facility school access, and improved frontline support.

Speaker 15: If I could communicate anything to state elected officials or school leaders, I would want them to understand that this kind of violence is happening in schools, and that it is not okay. Just like we look at other things, like drunk driving is not okay, we need to look at this and really take a good look in the mirror and say, 'This is going on. It might not be well enough reported that we all know that it's going on, but we have to acknowledge that it's here. And we as state leaders, whoever you are, need to publicly

say, this is happening. It is not okay. If it's happening in your school, you got to report it. You got to talk about it. We're going to make this better, we're going to fix it.'

Speaker 16: To convey one message to the leaders of either district, state, or schools, I would recommend that we continue to work together. This is not a one-solution-fits-all. Every student is different, every staff is different, and we need to make sure that we have collaborative processes in place where we are able to solve the problem with solutions that are best for both student and staff.

Speaker 17: One message I have for state leaders is that educator safety is a truly systemic challenge that needs to be addressed across all levels of the educational pipeline: from classroom settings to building environments, to district structures, and even alternative placement options. If we want to make meaningful change, we need to come together across all those levels in a coordinated way.

Marcia Ronak: I think what I would like most stakeholders to know about what we've done with this task force is that as educators, we tend to plan our lessons by our state standards. We go to those first, and then we plan instruction based on what our children need, the children that are in front of us at that moment. We plan for that based on the standards that we have as a state. But students are not standards. Our students come to us with all kinds of issues and all kinds of things that we don't know about until they step into our classroom. So when you're working with young children, as I do as a kindergarten teacher, they have very different responses to very different things. We don't often know what triggers them. And so as we craft legislation and as we craft guidelines or handbooks or rules that would help streamline this process to keep educators safe, we need to be mindful of the fact that no one child is going to respond the exact same way another child will, and then we do not respond in the exact same way. So knowing that this process needs to be nimble and it needs to be flexible and it needs to be developmental, it needs to meet the needs of the children that we have in front of us every day, because every day is a new day for them. And then we respond in that exact same way. The other final part of that piece would be that once we do have an incident, it changes also because then we have other people that come in. We have law enforcement, we have administration, we have people from outside the district, we have mental health. So that also needs to be taken into account when we look at how we're crafting plans and what is the best way to meet the needs of our students, because we really want to keep everybody safe, educators and children alike.

Speaker 18: The one thing that I wish our teachers and our staff could hear is that they are protected as well. Everybody understands the students' protections and the students' rights, but there is no understanding or very limited understanding of how the teachers are protected or how our staff are protected. So hearing how and why our staff and our teachers are protected, I think, could make a complete difference.

Speaker 19: One of the things that I'm really committed that my colleagues, teachers, people serving in buildings – I want you to hear is that we know that when you feel safe and you feel that your needs are met and you feel like that's a priority, that we also know that that's going to be true for our students as well, and that student safety will be taken care of. So the recommendations of this task force really are things that are intended to be common sense, building on probably many of the things that you already do in your buildings to keep students safe. We're really committed that the things that get implemented are best practice, they're evidence-based approaches, but fundamentally, things that are scalable. So no matter what size of district you work in, whether you're out in the eastern plains or in the Denver metro area, these are things that I think will make sense to you and make sense as you implement them.

Speaker 20: I think if there was one message that I could convey to our educators, our leaders that are working in schools, it's that we are not alone. We are able to collaborate with each other and build capacity with one another on every situation. I know a lot of these we consider safety situations, and I just want to provide a little bit of example of some wins that I've had in the past by creating a safety group within the school. For example, if I have an issue of what's going on in my school, I have a safety team that gets alerted, and I work collaboratively through that process because not one person individually can work through some of these hard solutions. We need to support each other. We need to be collaborative in making good decisions for the safety of our students and our staff.

Speaker 21: What I see as what we're needing in our districts, like in my district, we do not have a true continuum of services. We do not have a facility school, a therapeutic school, really anything that can truly address the trauma needs, the mental health needs of these students. We have paras that come in and out who have no training on how to work with kids with significant trauma—everything from tone of voice, body language, even how do you communicate with kids that are really in fight or flight mode most of the time? If you are in integrated services, we're CPI trained; however, admin is not trained. The training we get truly is not going to benefit if you are in the middle of an assault, especially with high school kids. So, we're just not capable of giving the kids what they need. We need smaller schools, we need more therapy. A lot of the kids that I work with, they're not even at a point where they can learn or be educated because they

are in a constant state of fight or flight and hypervigilance due to the trauma, and a lot of them continue to live in high-stress, chaotic, and unsafe homes. So they're coming to school and a lot of times not even able to be in classes due to that high level of stress. Again, I'm not blaming the kids at all, it's an explanation, but we truly need to meet these kids where they're at, and if it's going to be in our public schools, we need the resources, we need safe areas, we need teachers and paras that are trained in how to talk to these kids, how to welcome them, and truly how to engage with them.