

Testimony of Father Steven E. Boes, Executive Director, Boys Town
An Ounce of Prevention: Investments in Juvenile Justice Programs
House Education and Labor Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee
September 8, 2022

Good afternoon Chair Bonamici, Ranking Member Fulcher and members of the Subcommittee. On behalf of Boys Town, I'm honored to testify today. Boys Town has been educating the most challenging children in America successfully since our founding in 1917. The children we directly serve have experienced abuse, neglect, abandonment, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. The long-ago vision of our founder, Father Edward Flanagan, sparked a revolution in child and family care that echoes today in the work and mission of Boys Town. His simple dream to make the world a better place for children lives on because people continue to believe that every child deserves to be valued and loved, and to live a healthy positive life. At Boys Town, we believe that every child, regardless of circumstance, deserves the opportunity to succeed. We also recognize that every child is an individual with unique needs. That's why, over many decades, we have developed a distinctive, research-based approach to achieving our vision that has proven successful for tens of thousands of children and families.

For the past thirty years, Boys Town experts have partnered with educators to create safer, more effective learning environments in hundreds of K-12 schools. It's a partnership that involves everything from school-based support and hands-on professional development for school teams to partnering with students' families/guardians, connecting to faith-based providers, and connecting to additional resources in the student's broader community. The goals are always the same – to intervene *before* problems reach a level where anyone is unsafe and maximize student success by reducing disruptive behaviors and creating a healthy school culture.

Today, students on our home campus gain about one full year of academic success in core subjects for each semester they attend our Boys Town School. This means if you come to our school in 9th grade reading at a 6th grade level, by the end of 10th grade, you are reading at grade level. Due to our well-documented success with keeping kids in school and assuring they meet grade level standards, each year we successfully partner with over 500 schools –primarily located in Title I districts- and educate personnel through our Boys Town Education Model® (Model).

Through our Model which includes services much like other multi-tiered system of supports, we provide professional development to teachers and school leaders in positive classroom management techniques and positive parenting techniques to families. A few of our most noted outcomes:

- For schools and students, they include, an increased gains in prosocial skills, school adjustment and engagement, and teacher praise, with reduced disruptive classroom behavior and a 20% increase or more in attendanceⁱ and,
- For families and schools, improved positive parenting practices and emotion regulation skills in children, with reduced adolescent substance use, delinquency, and school suspensions (55%) through our Common-Sense Parenting® program.ⁱⁱ

We are also seeing promising results from our recently developed School Support Specialist program that uses skilled Boys town staff embedded within the schools to provide one-on-one and

group social skills teaching, and office referral support to teachers and administrators, while also connecting with the students' parents to provide resources, training, and supports that the student and family may need at home. As one school administrator recently said, "The air breathed easier when the School Support Specialist was in our school."

As a result of these and other successes in our tailored three-tier intervention model, designed to meet the unique needs of each community and school, our experiences and data show that we can successfully replace the *ineffective* model of exclusionary discipline – which focuses on behaviors after they occur and takes student away from the very educational environment they need to learn - and transform communities by creating safer schools and homes where children can grow and thrive.

Our Model is a multi-tiered intervention strategy that focuses on three main interconnected areas:

- **Students:** A complete social skills curriculum that empowers students to make better decisions
- **School Teams:** A consistent referral process that values teaching over punishing
- **Students, Schools, Families, Faith, and Community Partners:** A behavior-management approach that is proactive rather than reactive.

The Model replaces exclusionary discipline with a social skills-based approach that "catches kids being good," -and through this approach and techniques that go along with it- all of a sudden, the students who were the most disruptive in classrooms are consistently receiving lots of positive feedback and require less punishment. This program ensures that every school employee (including school leaders, teachers, janitors, school resource officers, specialized personnel etc.), and as many parents as possible are offered exemplary programming to ensure the behavior expected at school (and the tools and techniques essential to refocus and redirect the student) are also the behavior modeled and expected at home. In school, we help administrators use a revised system for teaching the skills students need to replace disruptive behaviors, and returning them to the classroom as quick as possible, rather than having them languish in the hallway or principal's office where they miss important academic instruction.

To give you a glimpse of what the process looks like -when a student has acted out in such a way that they are asked to leave class – our process includes having the student spend as little time as possible out of class and focuses on helping them understand that their behavior was unacceptable, that they are accountable for it, and that replacement behaviors and skills are available to them so they can return to class. A support specialist works with the principal and other leaders to help the student and discuss what happened and prepare to re-enter class. Once the student is ready to return and apologize, the teacher is also prepped to accept the student back into class, and to accept the apology. The principal or other school leader brings the student to class, the teacher accepts the apology, and accepts the student back. The adults praise the student for apologizing and give credit that the student is taking ownership and choosing to return to class. The teacher lets the student know what the class is working on now. In each instance, the school team and the student know there will be weekly check ins to help the student work on new skills and to have support. The teacher ups praise for every good decision made by the student 8 to 1.

The Model also includes a component that connects the student and their family to faith-based programs, sports teams, or other community services and networks that can help tie students to meaningful activities linked to positive adult mentors and other supports. The combined use of this tiered approach has successfully helped schools work within their community to solve one of the most intractable problems faced by America's schools.

In most instances, our work with schools and districts is made up of different Boys Town services much like other multi-tiered systems of supports, but it combines both school and family-based services together. These services help keep at-risk children at home and in school. The specific strategies, methods, tools, and resources associated with each can be tailored for individual schools or entire districts to fundamentally change the educational experience for students and staff. Educators across the country, at every grade level, use the Boys Town Model to meet the needs of their students. We hear regularly from principals, teachers, parents, and community partners who firmly attest to how these approaches have transformed classrooms, schools, homes, and communities.

In conclusion, there are two principles that we think are critical for preventing delinquency in at-risk children. First, remembering what Boys Town's founder, Father Flanagan said, "There are no bad boys or girls. There is only bad environment, bad teacher education, bad example, bad thinking." Second, at Boys Town we focus on *taking care of those closest to the children*. To do this, we partner together with parents and teachers to provide them the quality services and supports they need to teach and care for children. Getting adults on-the-same-page and working together to increase the use of positive behavior supports for students can prevent some of the problems our schools are facing today. Creating safe and effective school cultures is a significant priority of the mission of Boys Town and our commitment to all of America's children so they can be hopeful, thriving, and good citizens for our future.

ⁱ See: Bishop, G.B., Rosen, L.A., Miller, D.C., & Hendrickson, J. (1996) Evaluation of the boys town motivation system in a u.s. school setting. *School Psychology International*, 17, 125-131. Retrieved at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.682.9840&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, and Thompson, R.W., Ruma, P.R., Nelson, C.S., & Criste, A.H. (1998). Implementation of the boys town education model in four Georgia psychoeducational network programs: Initial impact on student social skills and adjustment. *Georgia Psychoeducational Network Research Report*, 7, 31-40. And, Burke, R.V., Oats, R.G., Ringle, J.L., Fichtner, L.O., & DelGaudio, M.B. (2011). Implementation of classroom management program with urban elementary schools in low-income neighborhoods: Does program fidelity affect student behavior and academic outcomes? *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 16, 201-218. Retrieved at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2011-18209-003>, and Oliver et al., 2019, Universal and selective interventions to promote good mental health in young people: Systematic review and meta-analysis, *Science Direct Journal*, at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0924977X20309159>

ⁱⁱ Duppong Hurley, K., Lambert, M. C., Patwardhan, I., Ringle, J. L., Thompson, R. W., & Farley, J. (2020). *Parental report of outcomes from a randomized trial of in-home family services*. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *34*(1), 79–89, at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000594>, and, Mason et al., 2015, 2016, Peer Network Counseling as Brief Treatment for Urban Adolescent Heavy Cannabis Users, at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5148746/>