Joshua Parker, Maryland's 2011 Teacher of the Year, provided the following responses:

1. What are the three biggest barriers to providing environments in schools that are safe and conducive to learning?

   *Describing barriers to providing safe learning environments is like describing the structure of a circus tent; the tent covering itself is akin to the actual barriers themselves which are abstract ideas and concepts, the poles that uphold/secure the tent represent the human factor in the maintenance/existence of these barriers. The ideas are connected to the human factor such that the barriers are carried by the adults – the three most salient barriers that come to mind are as follows:

   1. Lack of information (on effective managing of student behavior and creation of engaging lessons)

      All school stakeholders (within and without the school) should be aware of current and practical research and ideas that inform their way of managing problem behaviors successfully. Additionally, professional development needs to occur regularly that allows stakeholders in the community and at the school to share successful strategies for the management of student behavior. Finally, the first step to successful learning and effective classroom management is the well-planned, engaging and thoughtful lesson. Teaching is what empathy looks like in public. The degree to which teachers' instructional practices are informed by idea will determine the level of instruction.

   2. Lack of shared vision (with the teachers/students)

      What is the vision that governs a school? What is that vision based on? More importantly, how has the vision/mission statement/motto been created? A school must be governed by a practical and efficacious vision that takes into account the needs of the school population as well as the future goals of the school population. When this vision is shared, it forms a basis and context upon which to enact school procedures and processes that honor and encourage safety and learning throughout the school. Furthermore, all students should be able to develop yearly goals, mottos and mission statements so that they can continue to become stakeholders in their own progress.

   3. Lack of a paradigm that encourages emotional attachment (on behalf of the students and teachers) to the school

      The schooling process touches three domains – cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Most of the focus with instruction and the entire schooling process is in the cognitive domain. I think this focus is myopic. The affective domain is the place where more attention is needed. One of the reasons why schools become unsafe or not conducive to learning is because of a lack of emotional attachment from the student (or teacher) to the school. This attachment can be established and nourished in a variety of ways, but a paradigm or mindset that believes in its very implementation is key.

2. Do you think that suspension from school is warranted in certain cases? When should a student be suspended from school? For how long? Is two classroom weeks a reasonable maximum amount of time that a principal alone can decide to suspend a student?

   *Suspension is definitely warranted in cases where the physical safety of a child/employee is in immediate danger or in cases of felonious behavior (drug/weapon possession, theft, etc.). The length of suspension should be commensurate with the degree of the offense. I believe that Maryland has different categories of offenses (up to Category three). The maximum suspension should of course be an expulsion (which would be for felonious behavior including but not limited to severe bodily injury of a student/employee), but I don't see reasons why students should be suspended for longer than a three to five day range, even for serious offenses. A principal should be able to decide on a suspension within one classroom week. There are certainly exceptions for every rule, but there should be a clear distinction between behavior that results in a minor suspension and behavior that results in a major suspension. Additionally, there should be a clear code of conduct adhered to so that behavior is readily categorized and addressed.

3. Can you identify any examples of student infractions of a non-violent nature (e.g. cheating on an exam, tardiness, etc.) which can result in student suspensions and due to their nature would make you feel unsafe or uncomfortable to have the suspended student/students readmitted to school pending the outcome of the appeal of the suspensions?

   *Non-violent infractions resulting in student suspension include, but are not limited to the following actions: verbal abuse (using expletives directed at a teacher) of employees, consistent insubordination (no less than three instances) and school-wide disturbances (pulling a fire alarm).

4. Should there be a minimum standard of educational services provided to students expelled or placed on long term suspension? If you answer "yes," could you suggest the types of services and method of delivery to be provided? If you answer "no," please provide your reason(s).

   *Yes; students should be placed in alternative educational settings/schools, receive home and hospital services and/or receive tutorial services at a local community center or alternative educational setting. The instruction should be delivered via a qualified teacher/administrator and should be done in a concise way where a few skills and objectives are addressed with depth, repetition and variety. Another option could exist – students expelled or suspended long-term could access via an internet clearinghouse or wiki pre-designed lessons by expert teachers around the content to be learned.

5. Are you or is your organization aware of any other issues related to how student suspensions/expulsions are handled? If so, do you have any data which would shed light on the magnitude of this problem/issue?

*I am aware via reports done within my County and reports posted to newspapers that students are being suspended at inordinately high rates in certain Counties of Maryland. Not only are the suspensions inordinate, but they are disproportionate as minority students seem to be suspended at a higher rate than other students for more abstract or subjective reasoning (disrespect, loudness, loitering, etc.).