



# Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials

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## *Testimony to the House Education Committee*

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Good morning, my name is Brent Kessler, and I am the Business Manager and Board Secretary in Central York School District. I am here this morning on behalf of the PA Association of School Business Officials (PASBO). PASBO members are at the forefront of school safety discussions, decisions and implementation. Our members represent not only school finance personnel, but also personnel tasked with the responsibility of overseeing school facilities and school safety.

The safety and security of students and staff is a priority for PASBO members in school districts across Pennsylvania. Our members are charged with ensuring that students are safely transported to school and that they have a safe and secure environment in which to learn once they arrive. The unfortunate and continued incidents of school shootings, violence and threats warrant continued attention, innovation and evolution in our school security measures and protocols.

PASBO members have taken on the immense responsibility of school safety, and the resulting safety and security measures implemented in each school in each district are informed by the unique needs and priorities of each individual community.

From a physical security perspective, we acknowledge that districts have the difficult task of determining the appropriate level of security for each building. These critical and complex decisions are made after engaging the community, staff, students, local law enforcement, risk assessment experts and others. While the engagement of these important stakeholders and experts is essential to assessing the school security needs of each school building, the availability of resources often plays a key role in many final decisions.

For example, for a school district that doesn't have doors on its elementary school classrooms, adding classroom doors seems like an easy and relatively cost-efficient physical security measure to protect students in staff during a school security incident. However, it's not that simple. Adding classroom doors means that HVAC systems need to be re-routed, sprinklers need to be installed and moved and other

items must be completed to bring the building up to code, turning what seems like a low-cost security measure into a multi-million dollar endeavor.

With the current moratorium on new applications to the PlanCon program for school construction reimbursement, the ongoing missed deadlines on the report from the PlanCon Advisory Committee and the funding hurdles inherent in any real discussion about a new program for school construction reimbursement, many physical security upgrades present unsurmountable financial challenges for districts.

Additionally, considering how to move forward with physical security is complex and requires a comprehensive analysis of individual school systems, procedures, timelines, resources, staffing, etc. For example, the seemingly straightforward decision to purchase and install metal detectors involves careful consideration of multiple issues. What entrance should be designated as the primary entrance? Should staff be required to enter through metal detectors? How many metal detectors are necessary to ensure that all students can get off buses, into the building and through the metal detectors efficiently each morning? How many staff are required to make this process work? Can current staff be trained in this new responsibility or are new staff required? Are the metal detectors used all day or only in the morning? The list goes on and on, and the costs associated with installation could go up and up.

In Central York School District, as a result of recent events, we have taken the past several weeks to research many items for consideration in enhancing our school safety and security measures.

As discussed above, the first school safety measure we are examining is an obvious item that many are asking for information on: use of metal detectors in schools. As I noted, there are a lot of items to consider regarding use of just this single item. Hardware, staffing, training, liability and additional insurance costs; how many do we need, where do we place them, should they be in all buildings or limited to high school/middle school levels, are they just for students or for staff as well? We are fortunate that the York City School District is currently using metal detectors at their high school, and as part of our decision-making process, we went to observe their in-take process last week and learn how it works.

We also are looking into the costs and needs for either hiring our own internal police force vs. contracting out with local authorities for more school resource officers. We are currently pricing out what it might cost to have some hourly security staff available during arrival and dismissal each day during the school year. I would be happy to provide much more additional information on this topic.

As a result of the recent events in our own district, we have taken the opportunity to work with an outside organization that specializes in school safety and security to perform some risk assessments. They have also met with our faculty and staff to provide educational opportunities to talk about school safety. We plan to use them in the future for recommendations on how we can grow our staff training as well.

As part of this risk assessment, we have reviewed our entrance points at all buildings, along with bus drop off points, parent drop off locations, etc. We are reviewing doors being propped open or unlocked at times during the school days.

We have always had security cameras and badge access points for doors, but as a result we are reviewing where we might need more cameras or better types of cameras. Along with additional locations for badge reader devices to allow entrance for staff at entrance points.

Another major consideration is the student backpack. Do we continue to allow students to bring backpacks or bags of any size or shape to school each day? Do we only allow clear backpacks so that contents are readily visible? Do we not allow backpacks at all?

Hand in hand with physical safety, we are also looking at expanding the use of outside counseling services to provide additional student supports in our district. We currently partner with T.W. Ponessa from York County to provide mental health counseling to our youth and families at each building in our district.

Even with all these school safety considerations, the list continues on. What type of security or staff will be needed to ensure safety of all attending events after school hours? How are doors accessed and what type of entrance procedures should be required for outside rentals?

We hosted a town hall meeting immediately after the events that took place at Central York. We had a panel of experts all available for questions and discussion from our community. This was a very interactive event that our superintendent moderated. We have had great support from our community and families.

No matter what any individual district or LEA does, communication was the most critical factor through all of this. We are blessed to have a PR Director who did an outstanding job through everything the last month. So, whether it is before, during or after any school safety event or implementation of any of the above considerations, having the expertise of a PR or Communications Director is an in-valuable asset.

Overall, school safety and security is an absolute priority for PASBO and its members, and we believe there is much that can be done to improve the safety and security of school buildings across the state. We ask that as you continue to investigate the role of the legislature in this important issue, you focus on resources and flexibility.

School districts need resources to enhance and improve school safety. We need additional resources to engage experts in risk assessments, to upgrade physical security, to hire additional staff, to train staff and to implement recommended safety and security strategies—to begin to implement many of the great recommendations that we are considering in Central York School District. Additional resources targeted to student supports—such as resources for additional school counselors and social workers—are critical as well.

Nearly as important as resources, school districts need flexibility. PASBO members and other school leaders represented by the associations here today are in the best position to understand the unique

safety, security and other needs of their schools, students, staff, parents and communities. As a result, legislative efforts targeted at improving school safety must allow districts to proceed with those safety and security improvements, protocols and measures that are right for their individual schools and community. Mandatory, one-size-fits-all approaches across all 500 school districts ignore the individual needs of each school and will hamper the implementation of effective safety and security programs.

What works for York City School District might not be the right solution for Central York School District. Similarly, what works best for our high school, might not be the best school safety solution for our elementary school. We need the flexibility to have these important conversations and to make the decisions about what is right for our student, staff, schools and community without being forced to engage in mandatory school safety measures that might not make sense for us.

I can't stress enough the critical importance of the school safety conversation for PASBO members in all 500 school districts. And just like in Central York School District, these conversations and considerations are happening right now. Each and every one of us wants to find the perfect combination of school safety and security measures, along with increased student supports, to ensure that we never have to deal with any type of school safety incident in Pennsylvania.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I would be happy to try to answer any questions you may have or provide any additional information you may need.