



**Testimony on School Safety**  
**Pennsylvania House of Representatives Education Committee**  
**Hearing on Improving Student and School Safety**  
**March 15, 2018**

Chairman Hinkernell, Chairman Roebuck, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you in regard to school safety. I am Mark DiRocco, the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, which represents over 840 superintendents, assistant superintendents, and school leaders across the state.

As a former school superintendent, I have a deep connection to the topic of school safety and can personally speak to the many efforts that school superintendents undertake in an effort to keep their students and staff safe. It is a burden that weighs heavily on all school leaders and a responsibility that they take very seriously. The same questions are asked after each school shooting tragedy as to how we can improve school safety, but we never sustain the conversation long enough to solve the problem because it is so complex and multi-faceted. It is our hope that the conversation will endure long enough this time to make a difference.

In preparation for this hearing, we were provided with a list of 26 bills that have been referred to the House Education Committee on school safety. We thank the many representatives and senators who have proposed legislation in an effort to improve school safety for our students and staff. However, the sheer volume of these bills highlights one of the obstacles that impede school safety efforts.

Instead of 26 unique and disconnected initiatives that would create a piecemeal approach to improving safety in our schools, PASA recommends a collaborative effort be initiated to study the many recommendations in these bills along with other school safety resources and develop omnibus legislation or a coordinated series of bills that would address all aspects of school safety. We need to have a sustained conversation with all our policy makers, school leaders, and community stakeholders, to create a multi-layered approach to this issue and take deliberate action to prevent any more tragedies in the future.

PASA believes that some of the highest priorities to improve school safety include:

- Each district should be provided a district-wide safety audit by the Pennsylvania State Police or other qualified agencies in the immediate future. It is our understanding that only two Pennsylvania State Police Troopers currently are assigned to conduct school safety audits. State Police personnel or other qualified agency personnel availability must be increased to the extent needed to conduct the audits in a timely manner.
- School districts must be provided the financial resources needed to implement the recommendations of the district safety audits. Safe Schools Funding should not be administered in the form of competitive grants. These funds and other funds created for the sole purpose of school safety must be distributed to all districts based on the audit recommendations.
- Ensure that all school districts have the funding necessary to update the physical infrastructure of their facilities for the specific purpose of school safety. The reauthorization of Plancon will be an important factor in helping school districts meet the physical needs of their buildings to improve school safety.
- Collaboration between the school district, local law enforcement, emergency management, and first responder agencies is critical. All school districts should develop a comprehensive safety plan that includes these agencies working in cooperation with the school district similar to the All Hazard Plan template from the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office of Safe Schools. Once the plan is established, trainings, drills, and joint exercises should take place on a periodic basis.
- PASA does not support the arming of teachers and staff members for the same reason that most law enforcement agencies oppose that concept. However, we support the use of well-trained, armed school resource officers, school police officers, private security forces, and retired police officers in our schools. Legislation should be developed to clarify options for school districts to employ private security forces and retired police officers along with school resource officers and school police officers - and with the funds needed to ensure all districts that choose to provide this service for their students and staff have the financial resources to do so.
- More counseling, social work, and mental health services need to be provided in our schools along with training for staff members on how to recognize signs that students may need professional help. Almost every school employee can attest to the increased and growing mental health and behavior issues among our student population today. Additional funding to increase these important professional services in our schools is critical.

- According to studies by the U.S. Secret Service, FBI, and the U.S. Department of Education, school shootings and violent attacks are not random or impulsive acts. They are planned events. Most school attacks can be prevented if we are able to intercede while the attacker is developing the violence plan. In fact, many acts of violence have been stopped because someone made a report, and the matter was investigated in a timely manner. The key is to provide the services, training, and resources necessary for school staff to be cognizant of these signs. All school staff members must be trained to be observant of behaviors and statements made by individuals that could be indicators of violence.
- Most school districts have done an excellent job implementing bullying and harassment prevention programs, providing referrals to parents when they notice concerning behavior in their children, and training their staff and students on how to prevent negative social behaviors. Educators understand that we have to ensure all our students have a sense of belonging in our schools and communities. We are not aware of any district that has not implemented a bullying/harassment prevention program in their schools. Funds for ongoing training and updates to these programs will be critical as society's issues continue to grow more complex.
- We encourage policymakers to be mindful of the reporting and training requirements that may be established in future legislation related to school safety. It will be important that planning, trainings, drills, and reports not be viewed as compliance matters for school districts but as critical and meaningful components of school safety efforts.

No matter what bills are finally approved by the legislature and signed into law by the governor to improve safety, school districts must have the flexibility, resources and funding necessary for the sole purpose of school security. We do not accept the notion that existing school district or state funds can simply be reallocated to the level necessary to appropriately fund the needed safety improvements for our children and educational staff members. Only with additional funds will our schools continue to have the resources they need to fulfill their mission of providing strong academic programs and services to prepare students for their future. Pennsylvania ranked 8<sup>th</sup> of the fifty states in the 2018 Education Week Quality Counts Report, which provides a state-by-state assessment of public education. Now is not the time to put our upward trajectory at risk. We can and must address both the mission of public schools and the safety of those who study and work in them with the resources adequate to meet both goals.