



## **Testimony to the House Education Committee**

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Thank you, Representatives Hickernell and Roebuck and Members of the House Education Committee, and also to Representative Mike Reese.

As a St. Vincent College professor and researcher of mass shootings and school violence, I appreciate the opportunity to testify here. I have spent seven years studying events like the tragedy in Parkland, Florida, and I use my 11 years in public education as a Spanish teacher and counselor to ground my research in experience and practice.

I'd like to present four suggestions for your consideration. I bring them to you with an eye toward practicality, safety, and research, and I hope that they may offer guidance as you examine bills relate to school safety.

The first focuses on knowing the warning signs. While the increased number of student threats has been alarming in the recent month, it is also inspiring to see that other students recognize the seriousness of these threats and report them. In the same vein, teachers, administrators, and parents need to be able to recognize more subtle warning signs such as a pseudocommando mentality, a fascination with school shooters, and novel aggression. The use of an anonymous tip line to report threats and concerns is immensely helpful. However, it should also be supplemented with the incentivizing of programs designed to educate the community about warning signs. The organization Sandy Hook Promise offers *free* programs like "Know the Signs" and "It Starts With Hello." These programs are based in research and have clearly defined curricula for easy implementation.

Further, there should be a partnership between schools, law enforcement, and mental health professionals. They need a streamlined process to address the threats and provide the help that troubled teens need.

With a focus on warning signs, I also ask you to consider Extreme Risk Protection Orders. They allow for a safeguard that retains Second Amendment rights to citizens but also allows families and law enforcement to petition a court to temporarily suspend a person's access to firearms. In the face of evidence that an individual is threatening to harm to himself or others, he must surrender his weapons and cannot buy, sell, or possess firearms for up to one year. In my dissertation research, I found that nearly 40 percent of the school shooters exhibited some type of warning signs about potential violent behavior that included clearly stated verbal threats. In those instances,

an Extreme Risk Protection Order could have saved lives, and so, too, could it have saved lives in Parkland, Florida.

Secondly, I would urge caution against arming teachers, even if only a select few. If there is even to be a discussion about it, I strongly suggest conducting a thorough problem and policy analysis before implementing it. This would allow lawmakers to consider the unintended consequences, examine prior cases, and consult with law enforcement.

Third, I noted the number of proposed bills related to bullying. This is certainly an important issue facing children, especially given the research on the impact of cyberbullying in adolescence. However, I would also point out the ways that this would impact schools and support staff. In a time when educators are often overwhelmed with increasing responsibilities in the classroom and out, it's important to recognize that state-mandated bullying policies require additional time and resources. As a high school counselor in a state with comprehensive harassment, intimidation, and bullying legislation, I can tell you that addressing these issues were profoundly time-consuming. While it was certainly within the scope of my job description and important, it often required me to take time from other students who may have already felt overlooked and ignored in school. If you consider supplementing these policies with additional funds for support staff, including counselors and Student Assistance coordinators, it ensures that more students will have access to resources and help.

And finally, in establishing a commission to review policies, I recommend that you include policymakers, practitioners, *and* researchers. In doing so, it would ensure that they are evidence-based and founded on theory and research. I understand the urgent need to implement policies for immediate change, but they should be well-planned and evaluative in nature.

In sum, I believe that future policies and bills should be considered in terms of community partnerships and efforts. This burden is not one for schools to bear alone, and we all share a responsibility to our children to consider all possible outcomes and effects. I thank you again for the opportunity to testify and your commitment to addressing school safety issues.