



**Testimony to the House Education Committee  
On School Safety Issues**

**Presented by**

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**On behalf of the**

**Pennsylvania School Boards Association**

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Good morning, my name is Michael Faccinnetto. I am the 2018 president of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA), president of the Bethlehem Area School Board and most importantly a parent of 3 public school children..

PSBA is a nonprofit statewide association representing the 4,500 elected officials who govern the commonwealth's 500 public school districts. It is a membership-driven organization pledged to the highest ideals of local lay leadership for public schools.

On behalf of PSBA, I appreciate this opportunity to speak before the committee today regarding school safety and the diverse types of safety issues school districts must address. As a parent of 3 public school children I take school safety very serious. In the past few weeks not a day has gone by that I haven't been asked about the safety in our schools.

The shock and fear generated by the recent succession of school shootings at Parkland, Florida, and other violent acts in schools have led to increased concern about the danger of school emergencies. School officials are intensifying their efforts and abilities to identify and prevent potential threats, and to respond to all threats swiftly and safely. Preventing injury of our students is not only an ethical responsibility, it is also a legal obligation. Without question, children need to feel safe in order to be attentive in school and to achieve academically. It is our responsibility to ensure that our schools remain safe and that children may learn without fear of danger. However, I want to emphasize that there is no-one-size-fits-all solution to providing safe school environments.

### **Schools must address both internal and external threats**

Protecting our students means that we need to consider external factors, such as people and natural, structural, technological, and other disasters that come from outside of our school community bringing harm to our students, teachers, and administrators. Conversely, it is also necessary for districts to assess and implement solutions to internal threat factors such as school climate, bullying, student violence and other behavioral issues in order to promote school safety.

As school district leaders, it is our responsibility to consider all threats that may endanger the people in our schools and have a school threat assessment program and a well-crafted, vetted and practiced plan to address such threats. Schools are encouraged to use resources from the PA Department of Education, the PA Emergency Management Agency or the Pennsylvania State Police for assistance with planning, school security and vulnerability assessments, classroom-based active shooter preparedness training and more.

Many schools utilize school resource officers or school police to help make their schools safer learning environments. Districts can also deter incidences through building access control, including closed-circuit television, video monitoring, intercom systems, access-controlled door systems, a designated single entrance including removing external hardware from all other entrance locations, double door locks, classrooms with internal locking doors, clear display of photo identification on the person of all school district personnel, visitor sign-in and photo identification, established escaped areas, and updated memoranda of understanding with local law enforcement. Schools also conduct emergency drills so that students and personnel are familiar with the plan and procedures in place.

### **District policy and planning (PSBA services)**

PSBA assists school districts in complying with laws and regulations associated with emergency preparedness and effective relations with local law enforcement officials. The association provides for its members policies and administrative regulations that address necessary proactive and reactive issues and procedures related to various school safety areas that encompass:

- Bullying prevention and education;
- Suicide awareness prevention and crisis intervention;
- Student assistance programs;
- Comprehensive student services such as guidance, psychological services, social development, diagnostics and intervention services;
- Emergency preparedness planning and drills;

- Threat assessments;
- Weapons and terroristic threats relating to notification of the local police department;
- Annual requirements for assembling information required to assist local police and fire departments and immediate deployment of such information to the Incident Command Post in the event of an emergency;
- Provision of the school entity's Emergency Preparedness Plan to each local police and fire department;
- The Memorandum of Understanding with each local police department, which is required to be reviewed and updated on a biennial basis;
- Emergency and nonemergency response and preparedness; and
- Provision of the school's procedures on behavior support services for students with disabilities to each local police department.

PSBA firmly believes that school districts are vastly different throughout Pennsylvania in their security needs and, therefore, the best approaches to school safety must often be determined at the local school district level. All school districts are encouraged to adapt PSBA model policies to their specific district needs. Implementing proactive security steps that school districts, in coordination with trained risk assessment and law enforcement professionals, is critical for school districts to do, not merely from a risk management perspective, but because of genuine care about maintaining schools as the safest environment for children to learn and grow.

It is important for school districts to form strong partnerships with police, fire departments, EMS and other first responders. These responders can assist schools by maintaining positive dialogue with school districts regarding safety planning, conducting live-action training drills in schools, and having access to important security information about school buildings and those inside. These strong partnerships require proactive communication and have proven to be particularly effective in preparing for the events we hope never occur.

With the emphasis on the need for increased safety measures in recent years, Pennsylvania has enacted various laws to help schools protect students. They include

such changes as permitting audio recording on school buses for security purposes and allowing school districts to enter into police service agreements with local law enforcement outside the municipality. The most significant changes made were to child protection statutes to provide for more thorough background checks of prospective school employees and new provisions for mandated reporting of suspected child abuse. It's time now to look at what additional efforts should be made to help schools and students.

### **Legislative Solutions**

Amid the understandable sorrow in the aftermath of the recent school violence events, educational leaders, parents, and lawmakers must work together on solutions, some of which require action by the General Assembly. PSBA wants to emphasize that it has not taken a position on gun control and that its solutions focus strictly on school-based safety. With that in mind, we suggest the following for your legislative consideration:

**Continue and increase funding for the Safe Schools Targeted Grants and Safe Schools Initiative Targeted Grants.** These grants that are administered by the Department of Education are critical for schools to receive school resource officers and school police officers. Grants are also used by schools as they choose to fund programs and security-related equipment that addresses school safety and violence. When considering policies that address security equipment, specifically metal detectors, I urge the committee to fund that option through this grant, but not mandate this equipment. Bethlehem is a large district with two very large high schools, Liberty and Freedom. Liberty High School has approximately 3,000 students who all enter the school within 15 minutes each morning. A school like this would require multiple metal detectors and an equal number of x-ray machines for bags, not to mention trained and certified staff to operate the equipment. Schools are not Federal buildings or State Capitals that have 24/7 security in place. Schools are hubs of the community that open their doors to a wide variety of groups. If a school were to install this type equipment it would have to be used at all times. The sheer amount of afterschool and weekend activities would make this not only extremely expensive, but nearly impossible. Every musical performance, boy and girl scout troop meeting, community block watch, senior citizen,

Sunday morning church group, sporting event, etc would be subject to a metal detector and bag check. Deliveries would need to be x-rayed to ensure a completely secure building. In my opinion there is nothing worse than a false sense of security, and without the implementation I just described, that is what we would be providing.

That being said there are many districts who may choose to install this type of security. Increasing the funding to this grant will allow school districts, and the communities, to decide what is best for their schools.

**Provide resources to ensure that school districts can enhance, upgrade or install appropriate safety and security measures in their buildings.** Many schools across the Commonwealth are in need of physical updates and repairs to secure their schools. Many of these school districts are simply unable to afford school construction projects. The cost of security projects is complicated by the fact that a PlanCon construction moratorium has been implemented.

**Clarify that our school boards can discuss security and safety measures in executive session.** The Pennsylvania Sunshine Act requires school boards (and others) to hold advertised meetings open to the public and provide opportunity for public comment. There are limited exceptions to school board discussions that can be held in executive session. While we believe that broad community involvement is important to the education and safety of our children, making school security and safety plans available to the general public puts schools at risk to savvy intruders seeking opportunities to cause harm to our children. We ask that the General Assembly clarify the Sunshine law so that school boards can have discussions of school safety and security measures in executive session.

**Encourage mental health screening in a flexible manner.** Mental health screening can play an important role in helping to identify students so that they can receive the services they need. Districts need legislation that complies with current timelines of health screenings, is not burdensome to school administration but is effective in encouraging screening of students. Screenings could assist school faculty and staff in working proactively with students.

**Increase the availability of avenues for students to report threats.** Responding to student concerns and identifying individuals who exhibit behaviors that may indicate mental instability or affinity toward violence are important aspects of a school district's threat assessment and safety plan. Having more information of potential threats will aid school districts in responding to those threats.

Districts need increased access to in-school support services, including mental health professionals, guidance counselors, trusted support staff to listen and respond to student concerns, and education for all students on mental health, identification of threats, and to whom they should report. Although these services are provided in schools to some extent, difficult economic times are making it difficult for schools to maintain the breadth of staff and services available. As well, students who fear repercussion often lack an anonymous avenue for reporting suspicious activity or threatening comments, such as hotlines or anonymous electronic reporting.

PSBA asks that more technical and financial resources be made available to schools to maintain and expand student support staff teams and confidential communication channels.

**Direct PDE, PSP, PEMA, and other involved agencies to review and enhance technical assistance and resources they currently offer to schools for the violent threats schools face.** School districts need to be more prepared than ever before in responding to the unthinkable. However, school districts need enhanced tools and resources to prevent danger from surfacing in the first place. They need to have access to the most advanced, timely, and tested school security plans and emergency response models that are customized for the specific needs of schools and training on the implementation of such plans. We ask the General Assembly to direct PDE, PEMA, and other state entities that provide security plans, models, conflict diffusion training, and other technical assistance to evaluate and update their plans so school districts may continue to benefit from these resources.

### **Other school safety issues**

**Police presence in schools.** Regarding the issue of law enforcement officers or school resource officers being in schools, local school boards should retain the authority to review and decide what safety protocols are necessary. We ask that this issue not be mandated by the state legislature. The presence of a law enforcement officer does not guarantee safety in a school building and can be cost-prohibitive. However, officers can help to prevent tragedy and react immediately if a crisis occurs. According to some studies, a visible police presence may be helpful in reducing many forms of violence and increasing students' perceptions of safety within the school. Ultimately, it is a discussion that should be held at the local level.

**Arming school staff.** The issue of arming school staff, such as teachers and principals, raises grave concerns for a number of reasons. PSBA believes that if firearms are present in schools to guard against threats, they should be carried only by properly trained and certified law enforcement or security professionals. It is unrealistic to imagine that educators can or should be expected to undergo the kind of regular and intense training and practice that is required of such professionals.

This issue obviously has diverse opinions and strident advocates for each position. It is PSBA's position that we should not mandate this decision at the state level. Different school districts have different security concerns, and even within a school district, individual schools have different security concerns. Please allow school board members, officials elected at the local level, to make the decisions that make the most sense for our communities.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today about the pressing issue of school safety. As the president of PSBA, a board member, community member, and most importantly a parent, I appreciate the time and energy you are dedicating to the process of strengthening school security. I want to emphasize again that there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will work for all school districts, and that they need flexible options and the resources to implement them. We look forward to working with you throughout the process.