

March 14th,2018

Joint Testimony from Philadelphia Student Union and Juntos RE: School Safety Hearing

Hello.

We are submitting joint testimony from Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) and Juntos both located in Philadelphia. PSU exists to build the power of young people to demand a high quality education in the Philadelphia school system. Since 1995, we have been working with high school students across the city to support them in their leadership development and waging campaigns around education justice. Juntos is a community-led, Latinx immigrant organization in South Philadelphia fighting for human rights of workers, parents, youth, and immigrants. Since 2002, Juntos has engaged in community organizing and leadership development of young people to fight for education quality regardless of immigration status. We have collaborated together on work for several years around addressing issues of school climate especially around preventing harassment and assault of students by School Police Officers and agents from ICE.

March 14th marks the one month anniversary of the mass shooting at Stone Douglas High School. Since the shooting, the students in Parkland have been demanding gun control as a means to stop school shootings. Across the country, students have been mobilizing to support and share their own feelings about improvements to how gun violence is handled. However, it is also true that youth who have already been involved in activism have been sharing the ongoing organizing and advocacy efforts on improving school safety as part of this effort. This is an opportunity for decision makers to listen to the changes in schools that are being articulated by the same students who see the reality of what is happening within school buildings everyday. The charge to increase school presence, arm teachers and school staff has not been coming from students. It is a reactionary response based on reliance on school police which has not proven to decrease violence. In fact, any student who actually attends a school with the presence of police will share that there is little oversight or understanding of their role beyond “providing safety.” In Philadelphia last year, the 2 charges students were arrested for the most were for minor altercations (18 %) and disorderly conduct (15 %). These are situations that could be deescalated by other capable staff if the School District allocated funds for this. For this to happen, there needs to be decisions made in state government that values student voice and does not represent a reactionary tone which is exactly what arming teachers and school staff would provide.

Today, students across the state walked out of their schools because they want to be heard. In Philadelphia, our two organizations led a march called the Student Vision for School Safety which included 1,500 students who want to make sure strengthening of police presence in schools is not passed as a solution to gun violence. Below are the demands our members developed as part of the march. They clearly articulate where the attention should be placed and we are urging members of the Senate to use their vision when planning efforts to improve safety at schools.

1. ***Divestment from School Police Officers***:- An improvement in mental health resources throughout Philadelphia cannot happen without an intentional and accountable effort to divest funding and shift budgeting from School Police officers to other necessary programs that actually promote a nurturing school environment. The expansion of police presence and security personnel/equipment in schools must end, as it only promotes a culture of fear rather than reinforcing the creativity and voice of students.

2. ***Comprehensive mental and emotional health services:*** We want all schools in Philadelphia to provide a comprehensive program for mental health services so students can be proactively and consistently supported when dealing with emotional, mental, and social concerns.

3. ***More guidance counselors and social workers:*** In order to address the violence affecting our schools, there needs to be a prioritization around hiring more guidance counselors and social workers, who have the training background specifically to support the emotional and mental state of students and to encourage the development of youth.

4. ***Expansion of restorative justice practices:*** Restorative justice is key in building relationships between students, parents, teachers, school staff and community. It is an alternative to the presence of police and armed teachers that promotes emotional intelligence and communication which are essential skills to be honed for use after graduation. Our schools require an intentional, and systematic effort for restorative justice programs for peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher/administrator mediation.

5. ***Protection for students and families from ICE arrests around schools:*** Over-policing in our schools only serves to further criminalize young people of color at the expense of learning. Immigration raids across the city have occurred in and around our schools and in homes which instills a constant feeling of fear that impacts young people's ability to participate in their education. That is why we know ICE and police are two sides of the same coin for our families. Both are detrimental to our dignity and our survival, and we need to end their reach into our lives now.

6. ***Gun Control that does not result in targeted policing of black and brown bodies:*** Enact legislation that restricts the access of assault rifles, or weaponry used in mass killings without thorough screenings and processes for mental and/or emotional, criminal, or social concerns.

This is an opportunity for decision makers in the Senate to think creatively about solutions. The voice and ideas of students must be centered in this effort. Thank you.

Julien Terrell
Executive Director
Philadelphia Student Union

Erika Almiron
Executive Director
Juntos