



**PENNSYLVANIA
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE**

**Written Testimony Presented to the
House Education Committee Regarding School Safety
Presented by
Sean P. McAleer, Pennsylvania Catholic Conference
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Good morning Chairman Hickernell, Chairman Roebuck and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Sean McAleer. I am the Director of Education for the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference. The Pennsylvania Catholic Conference (PCC) is the public affairs agency of the Catholic dioceses of Pennsylvania. I oversee and monitor education policy for over 500 Catholic schools that enroll over 143,000 students in the Commonwealth. Catholic schools have educated millions of Pennsylvania students in an environment that fosters self-discipline, personal responsibility and respect for others.

It is unfortunate that modern culture and forces beyond the control of any school now combine to make even the most peaceful school the potential target of violent conduct or a natural disaster.

It has long been the policy of the Commonwealth to consider the children of taxpaying families who attend nonpublic schools to be equally deserving of the benefits of public safety services, such as fire protection, emergency services, police protection, nursing services and school crossing guard services. The PCC thanks PEMA, the State Police and our local municipalities for continuing to partner with us and for developing a Safe Schools Toolkit that is free for all schools in Pennsylvania. This toolkit offers suggested plans of action for all school hazards. Having these plans in place saves lives.

As Catholic educators we value the partnerships we have with our school communities, families and our local neighborhoods. When parents send their children to school, they expect them to be welcomed into a warm, nurturing and safe environment.

Unfortunately time and time again, we are shown the reality that bad things can happen in an instant and no school can escape the realities society faces today. Our nation continues to be horrified by the actions of a few and we need to take action now before we start accepting these instances as the new normal. The sadness of these days will live in our hearts forever. In addition to manmade tragedies, schools face natural disasters that can strike any school at any given moment. Not one day goes by that we do not worry about the safety and security of our students.

Catholic schools have taken many needed safety measures. They have developed school all hazard safety plans. School doors are locked and monitored and schools are not accessible to the public during the school day. Schools post signs guiding visitors to report to the office immediately upon arrival. Visitors must sign in and wear visitor badges while they are in the building. Staff members and students are trained to immediately report to the office if they see a person who is not wearing a visitor's badge. Schools have also purchased parent alert systems to notify parents immediately by phone, email or text messages if a crisis occurs.

Not all dangers are large scale threats, however. Additional efforts to ensure the safety of children have been made through **Diocesan Safe Environment Programs** in conformity to the Catholic Church's ***Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People***. All diocesan and parish employees and volunteers must take online and classroom training courses about preventing and recognizing child abuse and about mandated reporting. Each employee and volunteer is required to have background checks (including the expanded state requirements for school personnel) and wear a diocesan-issued badge at all times. Our children are taught personal safety with age appropriate lessons and we have policies dealing with harassment, sexual harassment, bullying and cyber-bullying for the protection of our students and our staff members. In addition, the animating values of Catholic education – including exhibiting respect and charity for other members of the faith community – are taught and reinforced in practice at all times.

Catholic schools will continue to focus on the safety and security of our students. We support legislation like Senate Bill 10 that gives grants to schools and local municipalities to support resource officers in Catholic schools. These resource officers are used both in and outside the Catholic school to ensure that students have safe corridors for walking to and from school, but we need additional funding and expanded time limits placed on this program if we want more schools to take advantage of it. In addition, more resources are needed to help schools develop and maintain an effective all hazards school emergency plan. As mentioned before, these plans save lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this most important topic of school safety with the committee. Please remember that if additional school safety resources become available in Pennsylvania we ask that you assure that they are made available for both public and nonpublic schools and their students. I look forward to further discussions with you about what all of us can do to secure the safety of our children and our school communities.