

Good afternoon,

I would like to thank the House Judiciary Committee for the opportunity to represent my family of educators, my fellow colleagues in public education, and the thousands of students I've been blessed to serve through my years in public schools in Western Pennsylvania

My name is Dr. Daniel Castagna and I am the Superintendent of the Woodland Hills School District, an urban school district very close to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Today, I'm speaking on behalf of my students and all of the other students here with them today, young people who are disproportionately impacted by community violence and trauma at a rate much higher than their peers who attend schools just miles away. Our team of superintendents and community advocates, who face these tragic events head-on, have banded together with the guidance of our local Coalition Against Violence and "Cure" Team. Together, we have created a smaller alliance within Allegheny County to share services and collaborate, seeking to build relationships with our students and interrupt violence before it happens. Without question, this collaboration and communication has drastically decreased violent incidents in our local district. But the single focus of our stand against the traumas that

plague the lives of today's school students must be this: we must end gun violence.

In my twenty-one years as a teacher, principal, and superintendent in Pennsylvania, I've had to live through too many tragedies as a result of gun violence. I've had to comfort families, rework response plans, and develop creative ways to keep our schools safe, while meeting the ever-growing emotional needs of our students and staff.

As a school leader, I constantly engage with the students and my community on serious topics. The first thing I ask a family who is facing a threat or an emergency is, "are there weapons in the home? Are the weapons accessible to the children?" If those answers are "Yes," our interventions increase, but there isn't much we can really do to make what we feel to be an unsafe situation more secure in the future.

And we know the names all too well – Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, and so many more. In the Pittsburgh area, there have been shootings at malls and local neighborhoods, even at a hayride. A neighboring school, Westinghouse, had four students critically wounded outside of the school recently. My frustration grows with every incident. Many experts give their opinions but do little, leaving educators and parents to look for the right

things to say after tragedy strikes and the right images to post on social media. We purchase items that will make our schools feel safer, lineup counselors and support services for students who may feel upset or were close to the experience. Then, this is always followed by a few less services in the next few days, and then a few internal policy and practice changes that never get to the root cause. This has become the standard approach.

But what if I ask all of us who are present today to take a different approach? Today, let us pause, and instead of directing our youth on what to do, instead of deciding what the appropriate next steps will be, instead **let's listen to them**. Maybe our voices aren't what our students need in these times, but instead our ears, our empathy, and our compassion.

In February, Woodland Hills High School hosted a student summit that brought together 250 students from ten schools. They discussed social issues that included mental health, racial and social injustice, women's rights, and gun violence. Some of those students are here today to speak about that epidemic of gun violence that has become, for some of them, almost the background music of their lives.

This morning, our students from western Pennsylvania reported to school at 5 AM to prepare for a four-hour bus ride, just for the opportunity to spend an hour in front of you on the Capitol steps and here inside the hearing room. After that single hour, they will get back on the busses, and spend another four hours riding home. All for that chance to be heard. So, let's listen!!

Let's let the purpose of today be proactive. I want to hear from them about their experiences and what they see as their needs. As students from many different areas, with different backgrounds and beliefs, came here today united with a common mission, I ask that the adults here – also from different areas and ideals - come together as one and take action towards completing that mission.

In what world would we ever imagine having to ask adults to protect students who are here today, in front of you, fighting for a life free from gun violence?

One thing we know our students want is this: starting today, we have urged our lawmakers to enact common sense legislation. Let's work to stop weapons from getting into the hands of people that shouldn't have them before incidents happen. Whether that's universal background checks, mandatory reporting of lost or stolen weapons, or enforcing safe storage for families with school-age

children. These intentional and targeted legislative directives, simply put, protect the lives of our children and stop unnecessary grief for so many!!

Students, I am so proud to stand here representing all of you. You inspire me to work harder and push harder to do what we can to keep our schools and communities safe. You are today and will forever be Our Reason.

I appreciate the committee's time and am willing to answer any questions you may have.

Dr. Daniel Castagna
Superintendent
Woodland Hills School District.