



**House Education Committee
Informational Meeting on School Safety & Security
October 10, 2024, at 10am
140 MC**

- 10:00am Call to Order
 Committee Member Introductions
 Opening Remarks
- 10:10am Panel 1- National Perspective
- Ms. Amy Bradley, State Policy Director **
 Sandy Hook Promise
- 10:45am Panel 2- School Perspective
- Mr. Kevin Mengel, School Resource Officer
 Spring Grove School District
- Mr. Todd Repsher, District Security Officer
 Bethlehem Area School District
- Dr. Jason M. Bottiglieri, Superintendent
 Northeastern School District (PARSS)
- 11:20am Panel 3- State Agency Perspective
- Lt. Adam Dickinson, Operations Commander
 Domestic Security Section, Bureau of Criminal Investigation, PSP
- Mr. Mike Pennington, Executive Director
 Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency
- 12:00pm Closing Remarks/Adjournment

All times are approximate and include time for questions.

Written Testimony:

Dr. Adam Oldham, LPC, NCSC, High School Counselor
Big Spring High School

Live streamed at www.pahouse.com/live

**** Virtual**



**Testimony of Amy Bradley – Director, State Policy
Sandy Hook Promise Action Fund**

***Education Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
October 10, 2024***

Good morning, Chair Schweyer, Chair Topper, and fellow committee members.

My name is Amy Bradley and today I join you in my capacity as Director of State Policy at Sandy Hook Promise. Based in Newtown, Connecticut, Sandy Hook Promise is formed and led by several families whose loved ones were killed in the tragic mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school on December 14, 2012. On that day, 20 children and six adults went to school and never returned home.

The issues of suicide, suicidal ideation, self-harm, acts of violence towards others, and social isolation can be very real among K-12 students. These feelings are not confined to students in other states; it is also a significant concern in Pennsylvania.

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, in Pennsylvania suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for people aged 10-24 and according to StopBullying.gov, Pennsylvania is ranked 6th nationwide when it comes to students being bullied.

Thankfully, schools in Pennsylvania have started seeking out solutions. Sandy Hook Promise is very familiar with many of these. For example, there are 142 SAVE Promise Clubs¹ with over 4400 students participating state-wide. These clubs are a part of Sandy Hook Promise's commitment to youth leadership.

However, this natural shift toward finding tools to better support students has resulted in unintended disparities. That is, for a variety of reasons, not all Pennsylvania students have equal access to high-quality, evidence-based violence prevention training. This unintentional disparity underscores the necessity for a statewide strategy that ensures all students have an opportunity to develop skills they can use to help connect someone else – or themselves – to help when it is needed most.

Such an approach is essential and aligns seamlessly with the objectives of the Safety and Violence for Education Act (HB 2086). Known as the SAVE Students Act, this bill is not merely a set of guidelines. It is a blueprint for creating a culture of awareness, empowerment, and support. Concisely: this approach can save lives.

Section I emphasizes the crucial role of suicide prevention training that centers the needs and interests of students. It is simple—a minimum of one hour of evidence-based suicide prevention training each year for students in grades 6-12. This training will enable students (and educators) to identify the observable warning signs of depression and suicidal ideation, for instance. It must also teach students the critical importance of telling a

¹ Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) Promise Club.

trusted adult what they know – in a timely manner. With these tools, responsible adults can intervene early, guide students to the help they need, and save lives!

But the legislation does not stop there. Given the urgency and frequency with which students are experiencing heightened mental health needs, it cannot stop there.

Section II centers general violence prevention training for students. By teaching students to recognize the observable warning signs of someone who is at risk of harming themselves or others, the legislation empowers youth to take threats seriously and act promptly. It also positions them to be active participants in contributing to the safety of their friends, fellow students, and the overall school environment. In short: it makes clear that their voices matter.

Next, the legislation considers the impact of social isolation. Section III is designed to provide students with training that will help them recognize social isolation and equip them with strategies to reach out and connect with their peers. Imagine a school where no one feels invisible, where every student matters, where students feel connected and committed to one another's general wellbeing, and where friendships flourish instead of falter.

To ensure that these initiatives resonate and thrive, the SAVE Students Act also includes student-led violence prevention clubs. These clubs will be open to all students, creating a platform for them to engage, educate, and lead using what they have learned in the violence-prevention trainings. These clubs could be existing clubs that raise their hand to be the keeper - and sharer – of knowledge. These upstanders will carry the message of prevention and inclusion into every corner of their schools.

In closing, I ask you once again to imagine a school; imagine a school where every student feels safe and supported. Where every student feels welcomed and connected. Where every student can identify a trusted adult. Think of a future where every student has the tools and resources they need to recognize the observable warning signs, not just in themselves, but also in their friends. And in which every student understands the vital importance of telling their trusted adult what they know.

Fortunately, Pennsylvania has a way to make this imaginary scenario real. It is called the SAVE Students Act; HB2086, and I respectfully ask for your support.

Thank you.

Testimony to the House Education Committee on the Importance of School Resource Officers (SROs)

Presented by: Officer Kevin Mengel

Date: 10.10.2024

Executive Summary

This testimony advocates for the critical role of School Resource Officers (SROs) in protecting students, staff, and school communities across all educational settings in Pennsylvania. As schools face evolving threats such as increased violence, cyberbullying, and mental health crises, the presence of trained SROs is essential. Over the last 20 years, schools have implemented new security measures, but these are only effective when paired with skilled personnel who can respond to emergencies, prevent incidents, and foster positive relationships within the school environment.

Key points covered include:

1. **The Role of SROs:** SROs are more than law enforcement officers—they serve as educators, mentors, and crisis responders. They work closely with students and staff to identify early signs of trouble, intervene in conflicts, provide guidance, and respond immediately to emergencies such as active shooter incidents. Their presence builds trust within the school community while deterring violence and crime.
2. **Types of Schools Benefiting from SROs:** SROs provide valuable security and support in public, private, and parochial schools, as well as in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Each type of school benefits from SROs based on its unique challenges:
 - Urban schools face challenges like high crime rates, gang activity, and external threats. SROs are crucial for managing these risks, responding quickly to emergencies, and fostering trust between students and law enforcement.
 - Suburban schools experience growing student populations and threats such as cyberbullying, targeted violence, and social media risks. SROs help prevent violence and manage student safety amid these expanding challenges.
 - Rural schools are often isolated and lack immediate access to emergency services. SROs in rural areas provide vital crisis response, address substance abuse issues, and ensure external threats are managed effectively.
 - Private and parochial schools face unique security challenges, including religious or ideological threats, potential targeting of affluent students, and limited administrative resources. SROs are essential for providing tailored security strategies in these settings.

3. **Challenges and Needs Based on School Level:** The presence and role of an SRO differ according to the school level—high school, middle school, or elementary school. Each level presents distinct safety concerns:
 - **High Schools:** Due to larger student populations and increased risks such as drug use, bullying, and external threats, high schools benefit from SROs focused on crime prevention, de-escalating conflicts, and rapid emergency response. High schools are also vulnerable to targeted violence, making SRO presence critical for both security and prevention.
 - **Middle Schools:** Middle school students are at a formative stage, often dealing with peer pressure, bullying, and emotional challenges. SROs in middle schools play a proactive role in early intervention, conflict resolution, and providing guidance to students who may be at risk of behavioral issues. Their mentorship is vital to preventing small conflicts from escalating into more serious problems.
 - **Elementary Schools:** While younger children are less likely to engage in serious violent behavior, elementary schools still face external threats, such as intruders or targeted violence. SROs in elementary schools ensure a rapid response to any danger while also contributing to a positive perception of law enforcement. Their presence can help create a secure learning environment and foster early trust in police officers.
4. **Response Time Advantage:** One of the most significant benefits of having an SRO on-site is their ability to respond immediately to emergencies. In crises such as active shooter situations, SROs can intervene quickly, using their knowledge of the school's layout and security protocols. This rapid response can mitigate harm and save lives, far surpassing the efficiency of relying on external officers who may take time to arrive.
5. **Changes in School Safety:** Over the past two decades, schools have enhanced their security infrastructure with features like electronic locks, surveillance systems, and controlled building access. However, these advancements require the human element that SROs provide. New threats such as cyberbullying, mental health crises, and the growing accessibility of weapons necessitate the presence of SROs to maintain a safe school environment. Their combination of law enforcement skills and mentorship makes them indispensable in responding to modern challenges.

This testimony urges the House Education Committee to expand funding for SRO programs across all school levels—elementary, middle, and high school—as well as across different school types and geographic settings, including urban, suburban, rural, private, and parochial schools. By ensuring that every school has access to SROs, we can create safer learning environments and protect the future of our students.

Introduction

Chairperson and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on a matter of critical importance—the role of School Resource Officers (SROs) in ensuring the safety and well-being of our students, teachers, and staff.

My name is Officer Kevin Mengel, and I serve as the School Resource Officer (SRO) for the Spring Grove Area School District. I have the privilege of working with students, staff, and the community to ensure a safe, supportive learning environment. As both a law enforcement officer and a mentor, my role allows me to provide immediate protection while also building relationships with students that foster trust and open communication.

The Northern York County Regional Police Department (NYCRPD) has long recognized the importance of school safety and established its SRO program to meet the growing challenges facing schools. Our department has been actively involved in school safety initiatives for nearly two decades. Currently we have two SROs in the Spring Grove School District, two in the Dover Area School District, and one SRO in the Lincoln Intermediate Unit's York Learning Center. As an SRO, I am proud to be part of a program that has evolved to address the complex threats that schools face today, from physical security concerns to the mental and emotional well-being of students.

School Resource Officers are law enforcement professionals who play a unique and indispensable role in our schools. They not only act as a first line of defense in emergencies but also serve as mentors, educators, and trusted members of the school community. Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a profound shift in the challenges faced by schools—changes in security measures, the introduction of new threats like cyberbullying and online radicalization, and the need for quicker, more effective responses to emergencies. This testimony will address the following key points:

- The types of schools that benefit most from an SRO presence.
- The superiority of on-site SRO response times compared to officers on patrol.
- How school safety measures, including security technology, have evolved over the past 20 years.
- The growing complexity of threats to school environments and how SROs help mitigate these risks.

The Critical Role of School Resource Officers

School Resource Officers serve as a visible, reassuring presence within our educational institutions. Their role is multifaceted, encompassing law enforcement, crisis management, education, and community engagement. The presence of SROs in schools is increasingly recognized as one of the most effective means of ensuring safety.

Law Enforcement and Crisis Response

The primary duty of an SRO is to protect students and staff from any immediate danger. Whether the threat is internal—such as an altercation between students—or external, like an armed intruder, an SRO’s rapid response can prevent escalation and minimize harm. In active shooter situations, the presence of an armed, trained officer on-site ensures that law enforcement action begins the moment the threat emerges, rather than waiting for external police units to arrive. This immediacy has proven to be life-saving in multiple instances.

A less visible but equally important role of SROs is crisis prevention. Their ability to intervene in early stages—whether it’s recognizing signs of a student in distress or identifying potential security risks—allows schools to act preemptively rather than reactively.

Education and Mentorship

SROs often serve as informal educators, providing students with critical knowledge on a range of safety topics. Whether it’s educating students about the dangers of drug use, raising awareness about the consequences of bullying, or guiding them on the responsible use of social media, the presence of SROs helps build a safer, more responsible school culture.

Moreover, many students come to view their SRO as a trusted adult with whom they can confide in, whether they’re dealing with issues at home, peer conflict, or mental health concerns. SROs are often the first to notice when a student is struggling, and they can work closely with school counselors, administrators, and families to get students the help they need.

Community Engagement

School Resource Officers also bridge the gap between law enforcement and the community. Through their daily interactions with students and staff, they help dispel the often negative or fearful perceptions of police officers. By fostering trust and respect, SROs contribute to a positive school environment and encourage students to take ownership of their school’s safety.

What Types of Schools Benefit Most from School Resource Officers?

School Resource Officers (SROs) play a crucial role in a wide range of educational environments, from public to private institutions, at every educational level. However, the challenges faced by schools can vary depending on their location, whether urban, suburban, or rural. While the role of the SRO remains vital across these settings, the specific needs, risks, and vulnerabilities differ, and SROs must adapt their approach accordingly. Below, we explore the unique challenges faced by various types of schools and how SROs provide essential services tailored to their environments.

Specific challenges and needs by location

Urban Schools: Managing Higher Threat Levels and Complex Social Dynamics

Urban schools, particularly those in densely populated cities, often contend with elevated safety concerns due to their location within areas of higher crime rates, increased gang activity, and more frequent incidents of violence. These schools tend to have large student populations, making them more difficult to manage and more prone to social conflict. Additionally, urban schools may face

external threats from the surrounding community, including trespassers, drug activity, and even acts of violence unrelated to the school.

The presence of an SRO in urban schools is vital for several reasons:

Crime Prevention and Conflict Management: Urban schools are often at a higher risk of gang-related activities and violent confrontations. SROs work closely with students, staff, and community leaders to reduce the likelihood of violence. They are also trained to de-escalate conflicts, which is especially important in environments where tensions may run high.

Rapid Response to External Threats: In urban settings, schools can be exposed to external risks such as criminal activity or even stray violence from nearby incidents. Having an SRO on-site ensures a fast, effective response to external threats, offering protection to students and staff who may be vulnerable to nearby criminal activity.

Building Trust with Students: In many urban areas, the relationship between law enforcement and the community can be strained. SROs help bridge that gap by developing positive, respectful relationships with students, teaching them about the importance of law and order while dispelling negative perceptions of police officers.

Collaboration with Community Services: SROs in urban schools often collaborate with local law enforcement agencies and community services to address broader issues like drug prevention, mental health resources, and truancy. Their involvement in the broader community helps improve not just school safety but also the safety of neighborhoods.

Suburban Schools: Addressing New Security Threats and Expanding Populations

Suburban schools often sit at the intersection between urban and rural challenges, and their security needs are equally complex. While suburban schools tend to be located in lower-crime areas, they are not immune to violence, bullying, or external threats, especially as suburban populations have increased in recent years. Suburban schools can face challenges ranging from isolated instances of serious violence to issues like drug use, cyberbullying, and mental health crises among students.

In suburban settings, the role of the SRO includes:

Preventing Targeted Violence: Many suburban schools have experienced targeted acts of violence, such as school shootings. These schools, often perceived as safe, can be vulnerable to attacks from both external intruders and troubled students. SROs are critical in these environments, providing on-the-ground, rapid response in case of an emergency, and deterring violence through their presence and intervention.

Mitigating Cyberbullying and Social Media Threats: Suburban schools often face challenges related to cyberbullying, social media threats, and online harassment. As students increasingly use technology, SROs can help monitor online activities, educate students about the consequences of cyberbullying, and work with IT staff to mitigate online threats.

Handling Growing Student Populations: Many suburban districts have seen significant growth in recent years, leading to larger schools and stretched resources. SROs help manage safety for these

expanding populations, coordinating with school administrators to maintain order and ensure that safety protocols keep pace with the increased number of students and staff.

Fostering a Positive School Climate: Suburban students often face pressures related to academic performance, extracurricular commitments, and social dynamics. SROs play a key role in mentoring students, providing guidance on dealing with stress and conflict, and contributing to a safer, more supportive school environment.

Rural Schools: Overcoming Isolation and Limited Resources

Rural schools face unique challenges that differ from their urban and suburban counterparts. These schools are often smaller, geographically isolated, and have fewer law enforcement resources readily available. Response times from external agencies in rural areas are typically much slower, making the role of an on-site SRO even more critical. Additionally, rural schools may face issues like lack of mental health services, increased instances of substance abuse, and threats from individuals outside the school community.

SROs in rural schools provide key benefits, including:

Immediate Crisis Response: In rural areas, local police or emergency services may be miles away, leading to longer response times in the event of an emergency. An SRO on-site can provide immediate intervention in cases of violence, medical emergencies, or natural disasters, buying valuable time until additional help arrives.

Addressing Substance Abuse: Many rural schools are impacted by the opioid crisis and other forms of substance abuse, particularly in communities where jobs and resources are scarce. SROs can help identify students at risk, intervene in cases of substance abuse, and provide education and resources to help students avoid drug use.

Combating Isolation and External Threats: Because rural schools are often located in isolated areas, they are more vulnerable to external threats, including vandalism, theft, or targeted violence. Rural schools may have less robust security infrastructure, making the presence of an SRO all the more important for securing the premises and ensuring student safety.

Building Relationships in Tight-Knit Communities: In rural areas, where communities are often smaller and more interconnected, SROs are uniquely positioned to build strong relationships with students, staff, and families. These close-knit relationships enable SROs to quickly identify and address potential issues, ensuring a proactive approach to maintaining school safety.

Specific needs and challenges by grade level

High Schools: A Focus on Crime Prevention and Crisis Response

Public high schools typically deal with large, diverse student populations and complex social dynamics, leading to a higher likelihood of issues such as drug use, bullying, or violence. High schools are also more vulnerable to external threats like intruders or organized acts of violence.

SROs in public high schools provide a critical layer of security, with their presence acting as both a deterrent and an immediate responder to crises.

However, private and parochial high schools are not immune to similar threats. While these schools may have smaller student populations, the risks are still present. In fact, because of smaller student-to-staff ratios, these schools may be even more reliant on an SRO for handling emergencies. Private high schools often have open campuses, which can increase their vulnerability to external threats, making the need for on-site security just as crucial as in public schools. Parochial schools, which may be perceived as softer targets due to religious affiliations, can particularly benefit from having SROs to address any security risks specific to their community.

Middle Schools: Early Intervention and Relationship Building

Middle school is a critical period for emotional, social, and academic development. Bullying, peer pressure, and mental health challenges are common, and an SRO can make a significant difference in managing these issues. Middle school SROs play a proactive role in conflict resolution, early identification of at-risk students, and ensuring that behavioral issues do not escalate into more serious concerns.

In private and parochial middle schools, the intimate setting often allows for closer relationships between students and staff, but these schools may not have the full range of security resources available in public institutions. SROs provide added expertise in crisis management, security, and behavioral intervention that may be lacking otherwise. Additionally, SROs in these settings can offer guidance tailored to the specific values or missions of the school, whether religious or secular.

Elementary Schools: Safeguarding Vulnerable Populations

While younger children are less likely to engage in criminal behavior, elementary schools—public, private, and parochial—still face the possibility of external threats such as intruders or targeted violence. The presence of an SRO in elementary schools ensures a rapid response to any potential danger. Elementary students are also highly impressionable, and positive interactions with law enforcement at this stage can foster a sense of security and trust.

For private and parochial elementary schools, especially those in suburban or rural areas, the immediate presence of an SRO can be a significant asset in providing peace of mind to parents, staff, and the broader community. These schools may have less access to the resources and infrastructure available to public schools, such as advanced security systems or large administrative staff. An SRO helps fill those gaps, offering expertise in both prevention and response to any potential crisis.

Parochial and Private Schools: Unique Security Challenges

Parochial and private schools, while generally perceived as safer environments due to smaller class sizes and controlled admission, face unique security challenges that underscore the importance of having SROs on-site. These schools, often tied to religious or other institutional affiliations, may be seen as targets for ideologically motivated violence. For example, parochial schools associated with specific religious traditions could attract unwanted attention from individuals seeking to cause

harm due to those associations. Additionally, private schools often serve affluent communities, potentially making them a target for theft, trespassing, or other criminal activities.

The SRO's role in these schools goes beyond emergency response; they work closely with administration to assess risks that are unique to the school's demographic and location. SROs are trained to customize safety protocols that align with the school's specific needs, whether that involves managing large gatherings for religious services at parochial schools or securing expansive campuses in private institutions.

Moreover, many private and parochial schools place a high value on community involvement and moral development. SROs fit seamlessly into these environments, where their mentorship roles can be framed within the ethical or religious mission of the school, making them trusted figures who model respect, responsibility, and good citizenship.

Charter Schools: Flexibility and Security Needs

Charter schools often vary in size, location, and educational focus, but they share a common need for safety and security. In many cases, charter schools may operate in older buildings or rented spaces that lack the structural security measures present in modern public schools. This makes the presence of an SRO even more important. In addition to responding to physical security concerns, SROs can help these schools develop safety plans that take into account their unique facilities, student demographics, and community environment.

Across all school types—whether public, private, parochial, or charter—the presence of a School Resource Officer offers unparalleled advantages in terms of both safety and community building. The size, structure, and demographics of a school may differ, but the importance of a trained law

Response Time: The Critical Advantage of On-Site SROs

Perhaps the most compelling argument for SROs is their ability to respond immediately to emergencies. In situations where every second counts, waiting for an officer to arrive from outside the school can mean the difference between life and death.

Immediate Action in Emergencies

SROs are already on-site, patrolling school grounds, and are able to spring into action the moment a threat is identified. Whether it's an active shooter situation, a medical emergency, or a fight between students, the ability to take immediate action reduces response times drastically. External patrol officers, by contrast, must travel to the scene, navigate the school layout, and assess the situation—all of which takes precious time.

Knowledge of School Layout and Procedures

One of the key advantages of having a dedicated SRO is their intimate knowledge of the school's layout, safety protocols, and emergency procedures. This familiarity allows them to respond faster and more effectively than an external officer. An SRO knows the best exit routes, the location of security cameras, and the key access points for emergency personnel. In contrast, a patrol officer arriving from outside may struggle to find their way through the building or communicate effectively with staff in a crisis.

Coordination with School Staff and Emergency Services

SROs work closely with school administrators and staff on a daily basis. This close coordination means that in the event of an emergency, there is already a clear chain of command and communication in place. The SRO knows who to contact, what steps to take, and how to manage the flow of information between the school and emergency services. This level of preparedness is simply not possible for patrol officers who do not have regular contact with the school.

How School Safety Has Evolved Over the Past 20 Years

Over the past two decades, school safety measures have transformed dramatically in response to emerging threats. From the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 to the more recent tragedies at Sandy Hook, Parkland, and Uvalde, schools have been forced to adopt increasingly sophisticated security protocols. Alongside these changes, the role of SROs has evolved from reactive law enforcement to proactive, multi-faceted security professionals.

Improvements in Physical Security

Enhanced Surveillance Systems: Schools today are equipped with advanced video surveillance systems that allow administrators and law enforcement to monitor school grounds in real-time. While this technology is valuable for identifying potential threats, it is only fully effective when paired with on-site personnel—such as an SRO—who can respond immediately when an issue is detected.

Advanced Locking Mechanisms: Many schools have upgraded their physical security with electronic locks, access control systems, and panic buttons. These systems can be remotely activated in the event of an emergency, locking down the entire school to prevent an intruder from moving between rooms. While these measures are highly effective in securing the building, the presence of an SRO is still crucial for assessing and neutralizing a threat.

Reinforced Building Design: Some newer schools are being constructed with reinforced doors, bullet-resistant glass, and more secure entryways. Older schools are retrofitting their facilities to meet new safety standards. While these structural improvements provide an added layer of protection, they must be supplemented by trained personnel who can manage the human elements of a crisis.

Emergence of New Threats

Increased Access to Weapons: One of the most alarming trends in recent years is the increased accessibility of firearms and other weapons, particularly for students. While stringent laws and security measures have been implemented to keep weapons out of schools, incidents involving guns brought onto school grounds have become disturbingly common. SROs are trained to identify students who may be carrying weapons and to intervene before they can cause harm.

Cyberbullying and Online Radicalization: The advent of the internet and social media has introduced new forms of harassment, including cyberbullying, which can have devastating consequences for students' mental health and well-being. In extreme cases, online radicalization

has led students to plan and carry out violent acts on school grounds. SROs are trained to recognize these signs, work with school IT departments to investigate online threats, and intervene before incidents escalate.

Mental Health Crises: Over the last 20 years, there has been a significant increase in students experiencing mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. SROs play an essential role in recognizing students in crisis, coordinating with mental health professionals, and ensuring that students receive the help they need. In many cases, SROs have saved lives by identifying students at risk of harming themselves or others and intervening early.

Conclusion

In conclusion, School Resource Officers are an indispensable part of our school safety strategy. They are not just law enforcement officers—they are mentors, educators, crisis responders, and key members of the school community. In a world where school safety challenges continue to evolve, SROs offer a proven, adaptable, and effective solution.

Across all school types—whether public, private, parochial, or charter—the presence of a School Resource Officer offers unparalleled advantages in terms of both safety and community building. The size, structure, and demographics of a school may differ, but the importance of a trained law enforcement officer on-site to respond to emergencies, deter crime, and mentor students remains constant.

By ensuring that every school, regardless of its type, has access to an SRO, we can provide students and staff with a safer, more secure learning environment. I strongly encourage this legislature to expand support for SRO programs in all educational settings throughout Pennsylvania.

The immediacy of their response in emergencies, combined with their ability to build relationships with students and staff, positions SROs as a critical line of defense in safeguarding our schools. All schools—whether elementary, middle, or high—can benefit from the presence of an SRO, and their importance cannot be overstated.

As we continue to invest in the future of our education system, we must prioritize the safety of our students and staff by ensuring that every school has access to the protection and resources they need. I strongly urge this legislature to support expanded funding for SRO programs, ensuring that no Pennsylvania school is left unprotected.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions.

Officer Kevin Mengel
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The Bethlehem Area School District (BASD), utilizes a multi-faceted approach when it comes to school safety. BASD examines areas of physical site safety (target hardening) as well as behavioral health, climate and school culture through various applications to include policy/procedure, programs, training and equipment. It is our belief that safety cannot exist in a vacuum wholly based on the physical. School safety thrives when the wellbeing of all parties involved in the greater school community are addressed through various lenses, I will mention each briefly.

Physical Site Assessments, conducted by a certified assessor provide a roadmap for individual buildings to address strengths and weaknesses. The assessors reported recommendations, when reflected upon honestly, serves as a “to do” list to ensure that best practices are followed. These recommendations can address exterior concerns such as fencing, lighting, landscaping, door/window numbering, appropriate signage, locks, and camera coverage. Interior recommendations will address cameras, door locks, window shades, man-traps, vape detectors, panic/door prop alarms, chemical storage, kitchen safety equipment, SRO/security personnel etc. The list can be quite daunting and often requires monies either budgeted, or from grant sources to address.

A Behavioral Health and Climate Assessment should also be conducted in collaboration with the Physical Assessment in order to get a full picture of overall school safety. This assessment examines school policies and procedures, conducts staff and student interviews, examines programs in place related to SAP, Threat Assessment, Suicide Screeners, S2SS, Multi-Tiered Support Systems, Restorative Practices, as well as other programs designed to address school climate and culture. As with the Physical Assessment, recommendations are made to align schools with best practices.

S2SS/Handle with Care

Like every district in Pa, BASD went live with the S2SS Anonymous Reporting Platform in January of 2019. Additionally, BASD was one of a few districts to pilot the United Way's Handle with Care (HWC) program. HWC partners each district with the law enforcement entity(s) that have jurisdiction over them. A HWC tip is reported by police through the P3 Tip Manager when a student has experienced some sort of trauma. This tip is then forwarded to the student's appropriate school, so that staff has an awareness and may respond appropriately. HWC went live in September 2020. To date, BASD has responded to 1313 S2SS Tips, of those 390 were HWC.

Threat Assessment

BASD has 23 Threat Assessment teams for the district, one for each building, and we utilize the CSTAG method in accordance with the Public School Code of 1949, Article XIII-E, Threat Assessment (Act 18 of 2019). As of end of year 2024, a total of 605 Threat Assessments were conducted with roughly 88% being of the transient variety.

Suicide Screeners

BASD has been digitally tracking our newest Suicide Screener that is housed within the NaviGate 360 Behavioral Health Platform since the beginning of school year 2022. In that time, to date, 797 screeners have been conducted. 50.4% are Low Risk, 24.3% are Moderate Risk, 17.4% are High Risk, and 7.8% are not defined.

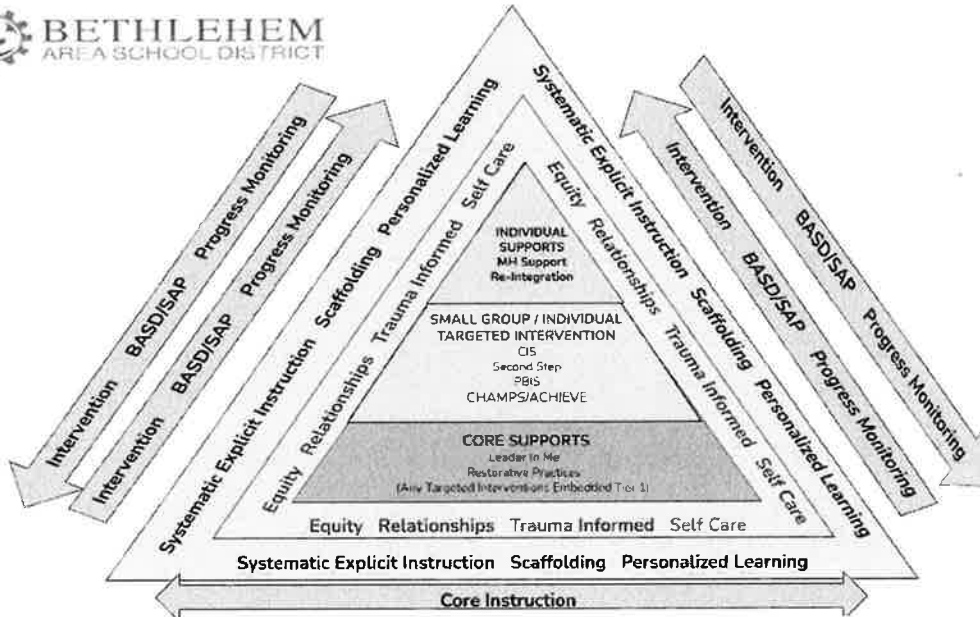
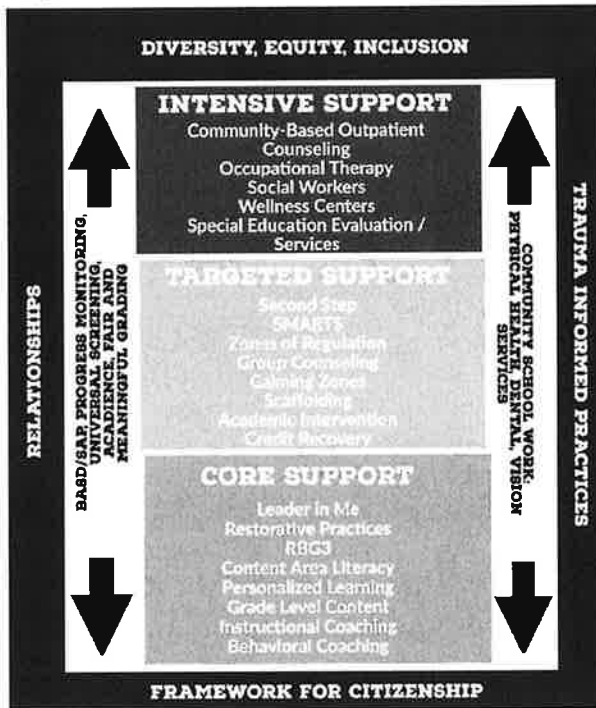
Training/Programs

BASD conducts all the required yearly State mandated trainings, including Act 55 Trainings which are overseen by the School Safety Coordinator. BASD also is involved with Sandy Hook Promise "Start with Hello" on the secondary level. Additional programs are as follows:

1. **BASD/SAP** - MTSS process that addresses students needs (academical, social, emotional, behavior) through a tiered approach to provide students the supports and interventions required to access the learning environment
 2. **Mental Health/Behavioral Health Services** through licensed counselors provided during the school day
 - a. All BASD schools (22) are certified as an out-patient clinic - students access through medical assistance or third party insurance
 - b. BASD directly contracts with a local agency to provide services
 3. **Project Impact/School Justice Panels** - BASD has partnered with Project Impact and Lehigh/Northampton Counties to provide an alternative to the adjudication process, a school based diversion program for secondary students that are first time offenders and charged with summary offenses &/or misdemeanors.
 4. **Leader In Me** - K-8; A program to help establish a culture of character and leadership with teachers and students based on the idea that every child can be a leader
 5. **Restorative Practices** - K-12; To support in improving daily school climate and culture by providing safe and equitable structures for relationship building, relationship repair, the development of critical SEL skills, building trust, and problem-solving
 6. **Resonance Education Consulting** - 9-12; Provides customized SEL learning modules focusing on coaching and implementation integrating these concepts into the delivery of the curriculum and classroom management/culture building.
 7. **TACT II/Therapeutic Behavior Management (TBM)** - De-escalation techniques; trainers
 8. **ABA Support Services** - BASD contracts for consultative, collaborative, and direct student services for students with an intense level of autism that cannot access the learning environment safely.
 9. **Trauma Informed Practices** - Administrators and teachers implement strategies that aim to create a safe and supportive learning environment for students who may have experienced a trauma
 10. **Zones of Regulation** - A curriculum that is designed to foster self-regulation and emotional control
 11. **SEIL Coaches** - BASD social emotional integration learning coaches provide staff with direct student intervention, consultation, and collaboration with the focus on implementation of tools/strategies to reduce student behaviors and increase engage in the learning process
 12. **Peace Rooms/Corners** - K-12; An area within the classroom or school that a student can go to clam down to regulate their mind and body
 13. **Wellness Centers** - BASD high schools provide a safe and supportive environment that provides a peace room with a collective of trauma informed practices and MH supports
- Check and Connect** - Is a structured mentoring intervention to promote student success and engagement at school and with learning through relationship building and systematic use of data

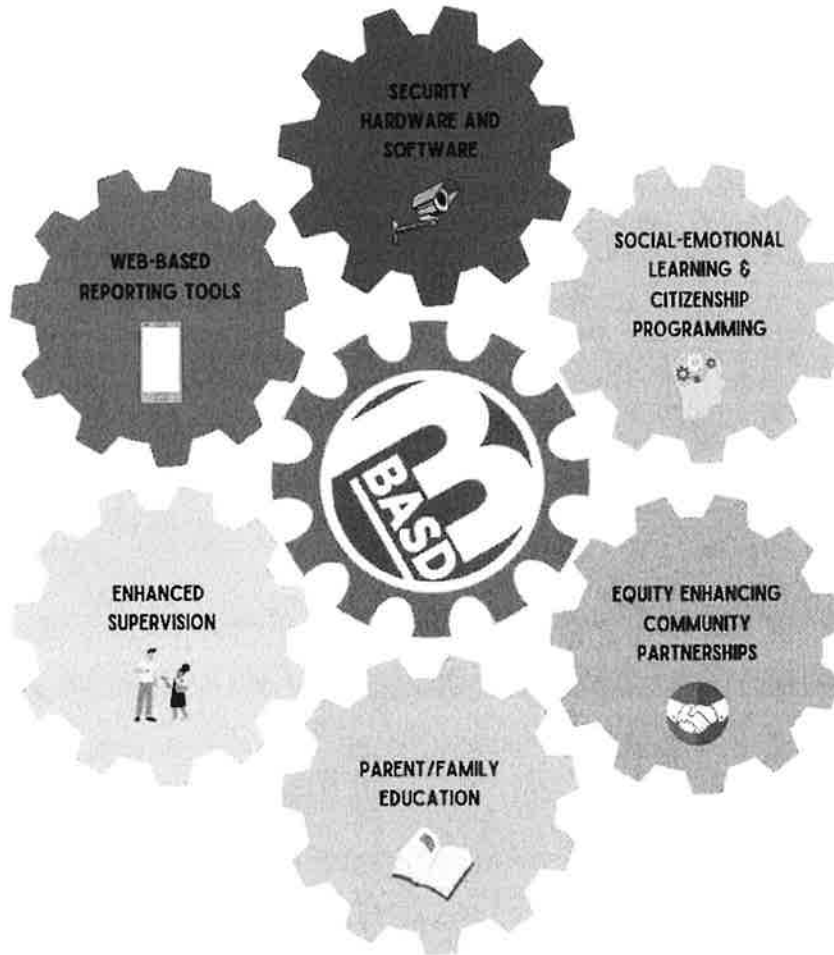


**BUILDING BETHLEHEM
SEL / ACADEMIC INTEGRATION**



BETHLEHEM AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

SCHOOL SAFETY & POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE



We at BASD believe that all that has been listed within this document serve to support a safer school community.

Respectfully,
Todd W. Repsher
Coordinator of School Safety



Northeastern School District

Dr. Jason M. Bottiglieri, Superintendent of Schools



Testimony to the Pennsylvania House Education Committee

Topic: School Safety

**Jason Bottiglieri, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools
Northeastern York School District**

&

Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools

October 10, 2024

Thank you to Representative Schweyer and members of the House Education Committee for allowing me the time to share the realities of school safety and security that exist in school communities across our Commonwealth. This testimony will highlight the current stressors related to school safety and security that are impacting our schools and how future legislative action, support, and fiscal investment can provide the necessary enhancements that our schools desperately need.

My name is Dr. Jason Bottiglieri and I have served as a School Superintendent / Commissioned Officer for more than a decade. During that time, fulfilling the challenging task of keeping our children safe in the rural-remote part of Bradford County, Pennsylvania at the Wyalusing Area School District and currently, establishing that same expectation in York County, Pennsylvania at the Northeastern York School District. As a public-school leader having held numerous school leadership positions for more than 25 years, comprising five different school systems across three different Pennsylvania counties, my testimony today is not only from firsthand experience but also from my engagement with school leaders across the Commonwealth. As a result, I can confidently attest to the challenges we face as school leaders and the inequities that exists across Pennsylvania public schools.

Today, I am here representing the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS) as well as hundreds of colleagues across Pennsylvania. Most importantly I am here advocating for students who are eager to learn, eager to engage, and eager to explore in an environment absent from threats of harm, violence, and emotional distress that is on the rise from social media which is having detrimental effects on students' mental health. Please allow today's information sharing to serve as a strong sign of the willingness school leaders and PARSS members have, to continue collaboration with our legislators on the very important topic of school safety and security.

The safety of our students is the foundation on which all learning depends. In recent years, we've witnessed too many devastating incidents where that sense of safety has been shattered. When students do not feel safe, it not only disrupts the classroom environment but also hinders their emotional and academic growth. Today, schools are installing double-locked doors, securing entrances, conducting immediate background checks on visitors, using metal detectors, incorporating walkie-talkie communication, monitoring surveillance cameras, conducting lockdown drills and reunification protocols—all of which have become our new normal. Alongside this, schools now face growing challenges such as student vaping, mental health crises, and rising incidents of suicide ideation and numerous other mental health and safety circumstances that surpass the belief of many. These issues have become an unfortunate reality of modern education. Schools that don't meet these security standards are often seen as unsafe, opening them up to lawsuits and harsh media scrutiny, branded as unprepared, and chastised for failing to safeguard their students.

While PARSS member schools greatly appreciate the funding and recognition that schools have already received to enhance safety and mental health initiatives, it's clear that continuous improvement must be a shared priority across the state. The strides we've made in recent years, from securing entrances to implementing advanced safety protocols, are significant. These investments have helped protect our students and have strengthened our communities' trust in

our educational systems. However, the conversation needs to focus on what's next. The challenges we face are evolving, and schools are calling for additional support to meet those growing needs. This includes ensuring access to mental health professionals, faster response times from crisis agencies, and more integrated safety measures that address both physical security and emotional well-being. To truly move forward, we need to eliminate the barriers that prevent timely interventions and sustainable improvements. We must continue to push for a system that prioritizes the well-being of every child, recognizing that safety and mental health are not just operational concerns, but essential components of a thriving learning environment and a thriving community.

Key School Safety Concerns

As school superintendents, our foremost responsibility is to ensure the safety and well-being of our students and staff. The increasing complexity of school safety concerns requires not only immediate responses, but also long-term strategies that are adequately funded and supported. However, our ability to implement effective safety upgrades is severely hampered by funding sources. Recently, school districts were informed that the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) safety grant and mental health grant have been combined into one grant application. This decision forces us into a difficult position; districts must choose between providing proactive mental health support for our students and addressing essential safety upgrades. Both are critical, but this funding consolidation creates a dilemma that undermines our efforts to create a secure environment for our students.

Another pressing issue is police response time in rural-remote school districts across the Commonwealth. The reality is that when an incident occurs, every second counts. Delays in police response can escalate a manageable situation into a crisis. Feedback from school leaders stress the importance for legislative support encouraging a close connection with local law enforcement to ensure that response times are minimized and that our officers are trained to handle school-related incidents effectively. Establishing clear protocols and regular communication with law enforcement can significantly enhance our preparedness and response capabilities. In many rural-remote regions of the Commonwealth, schools are served by small police departments or by the Pennsylvania State Police. These regions of the state are often unfavorable locations for the experienced troopers. As a result, troopers new to the field are assigned to rural-remote areas of the state and stay only a few months, as new opportunities open in other more desirable areas. It is common to see new troopers' cycle through every 6-12 months. This system prevents school leaders from building relationships, trust, and collaboration with local troopers. As an additional complication, the consistent turnover doesn't allow for responding troopers to become very familiar with school officials, the student body, or the layout and design of our rural school buildings. These factors further complicate school safety improvement efforts.

As school leaders we rely heavily on our local law enforcement officers to support us during times of crisis. During situations that require building evacuation and the reunification of students, the concerns of school leaders continue to grow. In the rural-remote parts of the Commonwealth, reunification efforts are challenging. A superintendent of a small rural district shares,

“I am responsible for safety, which is my largest concern as I am responsible for many students and staff daily. I know our local police, state police, and sheriff's department will be here for the district in an event, but establishing a reunification process remains a challenge with resources and the inability to stay ahead of social media to control any situation. While we have plans, I worry we will not be able to enact our plans efficiently with our resources, limited communication strategies, and over-involvement from the media. It is the one thing that wakes me up at night.”

In this age of social media, misinformation spreads rapidly, complicating our ability to communicate effectively with our community. Distinguishing between fact and fiction has become increasingly difficult, and we must act quickly to counteract false narratives. The speed at which information travels means that a minor incident can escalate into widespread panic, distracting from our primary goal of education and community engagement. Schools often engage in proactive preventive measures, such as student assemblies that emphasize the seriousness of these issues, small group conversations led by school counselors, and peer mentorship programs that encourage students to support one another; just to name a few. Additionally, schools implement workshops on conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and social media safety to help students navigate everyday challenges in a healthy way. By fostering open communication and educating students on the importance of mental health and safety, these efforts aim to build a more aware and resilient school community, aiming to reduce the likelihood of crises.

The Safe-2-Say program, while well-intentioned, is contributing to administrative fatigue. The influx of tips—many of which are unfounded—requires extensive investigation, diverting valuable resources and attention away from our educational mission. As we sift through these reports, we are left grappling with the fear of not being prepared for every potential event. This apprehension is compounded by the phenomenon of “copycat” behavior, where students may imitate violent actions they've seen in the media. This creates an environment where educators and administrators must constantly be vigilant, which adds another layer of pressure to our already strained resources and deters rising school leaders from making the move to an administrative position. A superintendent shares concerns related to administrative time,

“The amount of time administrators spend after school hours tracking complaints and reports down is becoming a growing concern. Remember, not all the alleged reports/incidents are being reported on Safe-2-Say or other recordable metrics. In other words, these folks are always on call and any of the presented reports could be a real event. There is tremendous pressure associated with this outside of the day job.”

However, despite our substantial efforts, there are increasing incidents where students demonstrate such extreme behavior that communities across the Commonwealth are calling for increased legal accountability. The current limitation has become a growing source of frustration for school leaders, who are now calling for stronger criminal or regulatory measures to hold individuals accountable for spreading misinformation or false narratives on social media. These actions not only undermine our efforts but also create unnecessary panic and alarm within our

school communities. It's crucial that those responsible for inciting fear are brought to face consequences, ensuring that our focus remains on the real safety and well-being of our students.

The concern about extreme violent behavior among students, which has recently seen an emergence as early as kindergarten, is particularly alarming. This troubling trend necessitates a proactive approach, including investment in early intervention programs that focus on social-emotional learning and conflict resolution. A prioritization of ensuring that all schools, including early learning programs, are equipped with mental health professionals empowered to address these behaviors before they escalate has become a necessity.

As school leaders look to continue to enhance their hardened safety efforts, superintendents' express frustration related to the lengthy delays in obtaining the free security assessment service provided by the Pennsylvania State Police Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Team (RVAT). These experts specialize in threat analysis, explosive effects on structural design, and target hardening techniques. This team and their assessment results provide identification of specific vulnerabilities within our schools, allowing us to prioritize our safety upgrades effectively.

However, the waiting list is extensive, with schools often delayed up to a year after initiating a request. There are more than 3,200 public K-12 school buildings in Pennsylvania and according to the Pennsylvania State Police Commissioner's Report 2024, 167 RVAT assessments were completed on public K-12 schools by July 2024. This report also indicates that, as of July 2024, there were 184 schools on the RVAT waiting list, eight of those are buildings in my district-Northeastern York School District. Without the necessary funding and support to increase their manpower and funding for schools to implement their recommendations, we risk falling short of correcting the identified safety vulnerabilities. While there are other vendors available for this type of assessment, they often cost thousands of dollars for each building assessment.

As we confront the rising frequency of threats to schools and the various safety circumstances that are brought to the school doorstep, it is essential to address these challenges with both effectiveness and efficiency. Fortunately, many of the threats reported in recent weeks have proven to be hoaxes, however, these incidents heighten panic and fear within our communities. These false alarms drain valuable resources and divert our attention from where it truly belongs. The ripple effect of these incidents is now extending beyond the classroom, impacting community events like football games, where families should feel safe and secure. It's clear that the stress and fear from these hoaxes are taking a toll on the broader school community.

To effectively respond to these ongoing challenges, we urgently need increased funding support to enhance our safety protocols, invest in mental health personnel, and strengthen our partnerships with local law enforcement. With additional financial resources, we can ensure that our schools are secure environments where students and families can thrive without fear.

School Safety Legislative Mandates

Act 44 of 2018 established a mandate for each school district to have a School Safety and Security Coordinator appointed by the Superintendent. The law also required that this additional unfunded, mandated position be a school district administrator. For many school districts in Pennsylvania, and for a majority of PARSS member districts, this responsibility was added to the

already full plate of the district's Superintendent. No funding was provided to support this additional responsibility in 2018 and still today, six years later, no funding is provided to support this important responsibility. Additionally, the position requires many hours of training with no funding support.

School leaders agree that having an identified person responsible for school safety as the 'go-to person' is important, however, our school leaders had a full plate long before 2018. Fast forward to today, in 2024 school leaders have been required to simply find a larger plate. Many PARSS member districts can't share or delegate this responsibility because there simply aren't enough administrators. The majority of districts most certainly can't afford to hire another administrator to fulfill this role; while vital in today's challenging climate, there is no funding to support the position.

Four years after Act 44, the General Assembly approved Act 55 of 2022. This law established new requirements for school safety and security training for all school employees in Pennsylvania. Prior to the passage of Act 55, school safety and security training for school employees was limited to three hours of instruction every five years. Act 55 amended this requirement and increased the training requirement to three hours of instruction annually. School leaders agree, safety training is essential as our safety scenarios, threats, and mental health incidents rise. With a growing list of annual training mandates, the average district doesn't have enough hours of professional development time available to meet the pre-existing list of requirements. In some cases, districts are being forced to determine which mandated trainings receive priority and which ones are bypassed.

Act 18 of 2019 established the requirement for all school entities to develop threat assessment teams. In part, a threat assessment seeks to determine if a person's behavior poses a threat of violence to themselves or others. That's quite a significant request—some might even call it unreasonable—to expect school employees to take on that level of liability and responsibility after merely earning a 'credential' by watching a few training videos. Threat Assessment training is offered for free through PCCD via online modules; however, the time employees need to complete the training is not, nor is the impact on other priorities they must set aside to conduct a threat assessment when required.

To meet the expectations associated with the threat assessment process, many districts have chosen to establish numerous teams for the district and sometimes a team exists at each school building. In some cases, this was done for efficiency because of travel barriers between district school buildings. In other cases, it is because the volume has risen at an alarming pace. Superintendents have shared collective concerns:

“We've experienced a significant rise in the number of threat assessments being conducted in our schools. It has been difficult to assemble team members who can efficiently respond to the threat assessment process, and concerns among staff about the potential liability of making an incorrect assessment is creating hesitation.”

“Threat assessments have doubled from this same time last year. We conducted 10 threat assessments during the month of September: this is alarming.”

“Law enforcement agencies often do not provide a definitive declaration on whether a threat is credible, leaving it up to the school districts to make that determination. This creates uncertainty and puts a heavy burden on school administrators, who may not have the expertise or resources to properly assess such threats.”

Senate Bill 700, signed into law on July 11, 2024, required Pennsylvania school districts to have at least one full-time school security personnel on duty during each school day. The Bill also separately provided for the reimbursement of costs associated with the hiring and training of one school security personnel, up to \$50,000. However, this line item was not included as part of the 2024-2025 budget which has left school districts with the financial responsibility of this mandate, and thus has created another unfunded mandate that comes with a heavy price tag. While the perspectives on this mandate carry mixed-opinions from school leaders, the frustration and disappointment associated with the failed full-funding commitment to support the mandate is consistent among all school leaders across the Commonwealth. Expanding on the school security personnel mandate, a superintendent shared;

“Not allowing a school security guard to have the same limited powers as a School Police Officer is difficult. This law presents safety concerns for districts where there is limited access to active or retired law enforcement officers. Consider legislative action that allows school security guards to have at least detaining rights, so if a fight breaks out in front of the school security guard, they have the authority to intervene and detain. Verbal commands are not enough in this type of situation.”

“The SRO bill has not been helpful for our district. I can appreciate what the legislature was trying to do, but when you create a law that carries the same requirements for our two building, 650 student district as it does for urban and suburban schools, it just isn't practical or realistic. At least if it was fully funded by the state it would be an easier explanation to the community.”

“An unarmed school security guard carries minimal impact. If the law was deemed important enough to pass, then what good is a simple security guard... it's an expensive hall monitor.”

“The idea of an SRO in schools is really great; however, we don't have the resources to make that happen. Our local borough can barely staff their regular patrols, let alone support someone full-time in our school district. Some districts have contracted these services but many times those positions are not filled.”

“In my area, it's been very hard to find local (reasonable distance) providers for the required NASRO school police officer training. I have several local officers who would like to become court-appointed SPOs for after-school activities and to

work as substitutes for our full-time officers, but given their full-time work schedules, they cannot find time to complete 40 hours of in-person or synchronous NASRO training. I would ask that such a training be provided as an online, asynchronous certification course.”

Financial Commitment to Unfunded and Underfunded Mandates

As school leaders, we are tired of being forced to make choices between the safety of our kids and the numerous other financially competing needs in a school budget. It is entirely irresponsible to force our school leaders into a financial tug-of-war between funding student protection, purchasing educational materials, investing in AP programs, or repairing a decades-old leaking roof. These decisions unjustly push school leaders into an unmanageable balancing act. The current financial support from state funds, while very much appreciated, fall drastically short of the actual need, barely meeting the drop in a bucket metaphor.

School leaders often become victims of compromise, forced to make financial decisions that set them up for public scrutiny, second-guessing, and public criticism over financial investment efforts for school safety. What is the correct amount of money to spend on school safety efforts? What is the correct amount of money to spend on hardening our schools? What is the correct amount of money to spend on armed security or police officers for our schools? And, what is the correct amount of money to spend on mental health programs, school counselors, social workers, prevention programs, etc.? I often hear “you can never be too safe”, “better to be safe than sorry”, or “why don’t we have...”. The reality of school safety is, like most things, determined by financial investment.

School leaders promote the incorporation of evidence and researched based curriculum programs and materials to support student learning. With school safety, every time another tragedy occurs, experts appear to analyze the chain of events, report on what the school did wrong, and promote the opportunity for more safety vendors to claim that they have the magic answer. School leaders have been forced to become experts in safety and mental health. We are now required, not only as a state mandate but also as a growing community expectation, to do so much more than ever intended, but with so much less to do it.

Schools continue to take on more and soon that bubble is going to burst; the growing pace simply can’t be maintained. We have seen evidence of this in recent years, while the increase in mandates rise and expectations for our teachers reach troubling heights, we have clearly seen a hurting education system struggle with high quality teacher recruitment. An exodus of teachers leaving the profession and high school graduates no longer interested in pursuing education as a career choice are the realities we face across the Commonwealth. And while the list of contributing factors is long, we know that school safety plays a significant role.

The request is simple, fully fund all the priorities and mandates that have already been established. Fully fund the Physical Security and the Mental Health Baseline Standards developed by the PCCD School Safety & Security Committee (SSSC). If the standards are important enough to be identified as ‘baseline’ priorities, then provide the full funding that allows all schools to achieve the established expectations. It is imperative that through legislative action, a financial commitment to schools is made that allows school leaders to get off

the sea-saw balancing act of how best to spend the limited school safety allocation and fully fund school safety priorities that protect our children and educators.

School safety funding cannot continue to be another example of the inequities that exist in our state. A superintendent shared frustration,

“Districts are mandated to implement safety and security legislation and there isn’t a reliable funding source to implement all the initiatives. There is funding for 1-2 years, but no guarantees beyond this for PCCD grant monies, etc.”

We need your help; our kids deserve it. We need more legislators committed to making school safety a priority, not by setting more expectations, mandates, or required program development, but rather with simple funding that supports adding people. Adding program after program will fail because we do not have the people to implement them. We have become specialists in what is needed, how to get there, and the associated laws and mandates that are already in place. School leaders share a common concern that as the state provides more funding, more policy makers become involved in the decision-making process. I believe there is an appropriate balance between the two that can be achieved between accountability and legislative mandate.

PCCD School Safety and Mental Health Grants

The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) is charged with the management of state allocated funds through a grant application process. In recent years, both meritorious and competitive grant funds have been offered to school districts to support efforts related to physical security enhancements and behavioral health improvements. These grant funds have been made available because of legislative action and school code bills.

In fiscal year 2022-2023, the Pennsylvania legislature provided \$190 million to fund and support Pennsylvania school districts with necessary improvements, of which \$95 million was dedicated to mental health initiatives and \$95 million was dedicated to physical security enhancements. The Northeastern York School District (NESD) received \$322,261 which the legislation split evenly between two separate grant applications: 1) physical security enhancements and 2) behavioral health improvements.

During fiscal year 2023-2024 (FY23-24), the grant allocation provided to Pennsylvania school districts decreased. FY23-24 saw a decrease in PCCD grant funds, providing \$90 million in funding for school mental health, of which NESD received \$152,277. PCCD grant funding also provided \$18.6 million for physical security enhancements. In an unpredicted twist from the prior year, legislative action resulted in a categorical funding amount for school safety determined by student enrollment. Pennsylvania school districts received either \$30,000, \$35,000, \$40,000, or \$45,000, which substantially decreased the ability for districts to address the growing need of physical safety in schools. This shift from prior years hindered planned safety improvements for PARSS member schools and now has school leaders continuously questioning the future sustainability of school safety improvements that were put into place in prior years.

During fiscal year 2024-2025 (FY24-25), PCCD grant funding took another hit when the Pennsylvania legislature once again decreased the overall amount of funding support. FY24-25 provided \$100 million to support physical security enhancements and behavioral health improvements for Pennsylvania schools. This was a combined application, a different approach than years prior. The NESD received \$177,986 in total to support both our physical security and behavioral health needs. FY24-25 allocation for the NESD represents an approximate 45% decrease in PCCD grant funding from just two years prior.

The three-year decline in funding raises significant concerns about the level of attention being given to two of the key issues facing school districts across the Commonwealth: school safety/security and mental health. Additionally, the rigid process associated with obtaining grant approval from PCCD continues to frustrate school leaders. School leaders collectively share frustration,

“The lengthy processing of these grant applications that have historically plagued the PCCD, is causing significant delays in making the necessary enhancements for which the grant is designed. In the recent past, schools in my region see grant application approvals taking more than a year.”

“The trivial demands and pushback from PCCD grant reviewers delay our ability to make purchases and implement programs with the funds provided, often forcing the new initiative to be delayed into the following school year.”

Superintendents express concern, frustration, and confusion related to supplement/supplant requirements. There is strong support for eliminating the supplement requirement as districts grow in skepticism of their ability to sustain previous purchases paid from PCCD grant funds. The following is provided as an example of our feared uncertainty: A school district uses PCCD grant funds to purchase video surveillance security camera equipment and license fees. The annual license fee is feared to be deemed supplantation and thus denied as a legitimate grant fund usage on future PCCD school safety grant applications. This circumstance then requires the district to absorb the financial responsibility for the cost associated with security camera license fees.

Historically, competitive grant funding has been made available on an annual basis. During fiscal year 2023-2024, PCCD announced a competitive school grant application opportunity where \$32 million was made available for eligible applicants to write a grant for up to \$450,000 to fund physical security and behavioral health needs. Eligible applicants included: school districts, intermediate units, area career and technical schools, charter schools, cyber charter schools, regional charter schools, approved private schools, chartered school for the education of the deaf or the blind, or private residential rehabilitative institutions; and municipalities, law enforcement agencies, and approved vendors.

With the long list of eligible entities, PARSS member school districts portray concerns of a disadvantage. Forcing schools to compete with each other and other organizations for critical safety and mental health funding is not just unfair, it's counterproductive. Our small and rural schools simply don't have the same resources or grant writing capacity as larger districts. This

leaves many of our students without the essential support they need, simply because their schools couldn't navigate the competitive grant process. Safety and mental health shouldn't be treated as luxuries – they are fundamental needs for every student, in every community. Even though the distribution of these competitive grant funds is supposed to represent a geographic distribution across the Commonwealth, our member school superintendents express numerous concerns,

“The way safety has been supported by the state favors larger more affluent schools. Making a grant competitive favors larger districts who have the personnel to write the grants and administer them, and, at times, have more political influence.”

“In my region of rural Pennsylvania, our districts almost never receive competitive grant money. If there are going to be mandates, it would be helpful to ensure funding for those mandates, so we are not left scrambling to figure out how we pay for this. We don't have the ability to generate significant funds through tax increases so anything that is mandated and not funded has an outsized impact on our school district compared to more suburban and urban districts.”

Grant funding for school safety and mental health programs should never be competitive. The well-being and safety of students are universal needs that every school district must address, regardless of location, size, or socioeconomic status. Making these critical resources contingent upon a competitive grant process leaves some districts, particularly those in underserved or rural areas, at a significant disadvantage. Competitive grants often favor districts with the capacity to hire grant writers, maintain robust data collection systems, and demonstrate a high level of readiness for implementation, which not all districts can afford. This creates a disparity where the schools most in need of funding may be the least equipped to secure it, exacerbating existing inequities in education and student well-being.

Schools cannot reliably plan long-term initiatives or hire permanent staff, like counselors or security personnel, based on short-term or one-time competitive grants. Mental health and safety programs require sustained, continuous investment to be effective. Schools forced to rely on competitive grants may find themselves cutting successful programs simply because they couldn't secure the next round of funding. This lack of stability undermines the very purpose of these programs, which is to provide reliable, ongoing support to students who need it most.

Safety and mental health personnel are foundational to a student's ability to learn and thrive in school. When grant funding for these areas is competitive, it implies that these are optional or supplementary services rather than core elements of a successful education system. These programs are not just important during times of crisis, but essential for preventing crises from occurring. By making funding for these services competitive, we risk a reactive rather than proactive approach, where only the districts that manage to secure grants can implement preventive measures, while others may be left to manage the aftermath of preventable incidents.

Supporting the Growing Needs of Behavioral Health

With the recent combining of grant funds into one application, along with the decreased funding allocation, district leaders have been conflicted in making choices between prioritizing efforts focused on behavioral health or physical safety. It's important to note that school leaders are aware that the funding allocation can be divided between the two areas but prefer a separation of the two focused topics due to the public perception of equal importance. Typically, districts like and appreciate choices. In this case, the combining of the grant has left school leaders to defend stakeholder scrutiny about the prioritization of two very different school safety efforts; physical security versus behavioral health. Superintendents shared,

“We are advocating for a separation of physical security grants and mental health grants. Both are worthy of state level funding through appropriations and grants; however, we would ask that the state NOT make districts choose one over the other but offer opportunities for separate and full funding for both.”

The drastic rise in the mental health needs of adolescents pose the biggest challenge for our school leaders. Often times we find, through attempted interventions by school counselors, that parents and their child share the same mental health challenge. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the mental health circumstances impacting students is generational. Nevertheless, we remain committed to addressing the barrier to student success, but that must become a shared responsibility and must contain funding for personnel to more effectively address the growing crisis.

Schools across the Commonwealth consistently share how the actions of one have a negative impact on many. Mental health situations not only impact the individual student experiencing a crisis, but often the situation fosters throughout the school building, into the classrooms, hallways, common areas, and lavatory facilities, eventually flowing outdoors. These situations lessen the time teachers have available to focus on instruction and learning. Significant situations of a mental health crisis are at a high, causing classrooms to be emptied, hallways to be cleared, and buildings to be locked down. In a recent experience a school leader shared,

“This week a student made significant threats of suicide, self-harm, and a committed desire to ‘not go quietly’. The student stated, ‘if I were you, I would be worried about me tonight’ to attempted administrative intervention. Attempts to communicate with the county crisis department have consistently been met with resistance and limited staffing excuses resulting in extreme frustration for us. School Resource Officers already in place at the district are reluctant to address the situation through the mental health system, involuntary commitment for psychiatric placement, and hospitalization, as the juvenile laws combined with law enforcement regulations don't often work collaboratively. In this situation, the student caused two school buildings to be locked down after running across campuses, further escalating the situation. Taking the mental health crisis and adding layers of school safety to the complex situation caused avoidable panic. The student became uncooperative with responding police officers, was eventually tackled on the front lawn, handcuffed, and escorted involuntarily to the hospital,

only to be subsequently released a few hours later. The mental health crisis and suicidal ideation resurfaced at the school the very next day.”

I hear these situations from school leaders across the entire state. These situations are real and are occurring more frequently than what is widely recognized. The calls for mental health resources cannot go unheard. It is important to recognize that schools have responded and incorporated multiple systems of support and continue to meet all the state mandates in this area.

Most schools are not equipped to meet the mental health needs of students and families. Teachers, counselors, and other school employees are overloaded. They simply can't do more, and this area is not the expertise of many. So, what is the answer and how can legislators help this growing crisis?

It's time for a thorough review of juvenile justice laws, policies, and practices that influence law enforcement's ability to support schools when situations escalate to this level. Additionally, the medical community must have the authority and expertise to fully grasp the profound impact of a student's mental health—not only on the individual but also on other students who are striving to exercise their constitutional right to a high-quality education.

People Not Programs

Schools are asking for an increased investment from the state to ensure that systems which are already in place are fully funded so we can stop getting the 'busy signal' on the other end when we call for help. County crisis agencies are understaffed and cover large areas that prevent any type of expedited response, leaving our schools with limited options and no help during mental health situations. School leaders have shared their pleas to support a crisis worker to be assigned to each district. That is a tell-tale sign of how large of a problem we are experiencing in our schools.

County Children and Youth Service agencies continue to face a high number of vacancies and offer inadequate pay, hindering recruitment efforts and contributing to the declining interest in this field. School leaders across the state share concerns about delayed response times from child protective services, limited communication with school officials, and a lack of collaboration that supports the child. Additionally, there is often no confirmation that safety interventions are in place. These issues frequently return to our schools, resulting in repeated pleas for assistance. We need a more efficient system that prioritizes the well-being of our children.

Moreover, school personnel are drowning. Amid growing concerns related to our abilities to respond to this growing mental health need, it is forcing districts to question if we are properly equipped to serve as what has become the primary safety net for these ongoing crises. When county agencies cannot respond swiftly, schools are left to fill the gap with insufficient resources. This puts enormous strain on teachers, administrators, and counselors who are not crisis intervention experts. While educators are dedicated to the well-being of their students, they are being asked to manage situations that require specialized care and highly trained professional intervention. Without a well-coordinated system between schools and county services, vulnerable children continue to slip through the cracks, exacerbating issues like trauma, neglect, and behavioral challenges. It's critical that state officials recognize the urgency of the situation

and prioritize the necessary funding to bolster both county services and school-based mental health support, ensuring a rapid and reliable safety net for every student in need.

Competing Budget Interests

As operational costs to school districts continue to surpass the available funding, school districts are often forced to make difficult choices regarding resource allocation. The prioritization of project investments becomes a daunting task for school leaders, as they must weigh the immediate needs of their schools against long-term goals and the constraints of tight budgets. School leaders are generally familiar and comfortable with decision-making in areas like daily district operational costs, long-term budget planning, and the prioritization of maintenance projects. However, there is a collective concern that these same rigorous budget constraints should not extend to areas impacting student safety and behavioral health.

While districts may need to defer or scale back mechanical upgrades or academic initiatives, the idea of compromising on essential services that protect students' physical well-being or address their mental and emotional needs is unsettling. In many cases, leaders believe that student safety, mental health services, and behavioral support programs should be safeguarded from cuts, as these directly influence a student's ability to succeed in a secure and supportive learning environment. Consequently, districts are advocating for more stable, designated funding streams to ensure that critical safety and health initiatives are not left vulnerable to budget shortfalls. A superintendent noted,

“Our district is underfunded by nearly \$3,500 per student. Annually we are fighting to determine which positions/programs to cut and which to keep. School safety is a priority, but it is difficult, if not impossible to balance what things to sacrifice in order to pay for school safety measures and what school safety measures to ignore in favor of educational programs.”

“School districts are continually balancing a variety of competing financial demands, often leaving essential aspects like school safety underfunded. Educational leaders are tasked with allocating limited resources across numerous critical areas, such as academic programs, technology upgrades, staff salaries, infrastructure maintenance, and extracurricular activities. Many of these areas come with pressing demands—ensuring up-to-date curriculum and technology, maintaining competitive teacher salaries to avoid staff shortages, and complying with federal or state mandates for academic performance.”

School leaders have noted that technology investments are often prioritized due to the increasing demand for modernized classrooms, online learning capabilities, and keeping pace with educational trends. Additionally, many districts are faced with crumbling infrastructure and outdated buildings that require significant repair and renovation, which also compete for already stretched financial resources.

Another significant factor is the need to manage rising healthcare and employee benefit costs for school employees. These mandatory costs tend to eat away at discretionary budgets, limiting what's left for other projects and initiatives. Likewise, special education services, which are

legally mandated, continue to grow in expense, further reducing the available funds that can be applied to non-mandated areas, including safety improvements and mental health services.

As a result, school safety measures—such as security personnel, surveillance systems, mental health counselors, anti-bullying programs, and behavioral health initiatives—are often left to compete for funding with other priorities. Since these safety and behavioral programs do not always produce immediate, quantifiable results, they can sometimes be deprioritized in favor of more tangible, short-term outcomes like new equipment or improved test scores.

Furthermore, while state grant programs may temporarily boost school safety initiatives, these resources are feared to be non-recurring. When those funds dry up, districts are deeply concerned about the likelihood of struggling to maintain safety measures without a dedicated, long-term funding solution. In many cases, when faced with tough budgetary decisions, districts are forced to reduce or delay safety initiatives, leaving students and staff potentially vulnerable in the process.

Without a clear prioritization or funding mechanism, student safety and well-being risks being placed on the back burner. Leaders are calling for increased state funding specifically earmarked for safety enhancements and mental health personnel.

Call to Action

We have a collective obligation to ensure that every student can attend school without fear. School safety is not just about preventing the worst-case scenario; it's about fostering an environment where students can thrive. School leaders are asking for full funding so that the prioritization of safety is more than a catch phrase. Safeguard the physical and emotional well-being of students, as well as those dedicated professionals who have chosen a career to make a meaningful impact in their lives.

As administrators and school personnel are forced to become more involved with school safety and security, the concern of liability protection increases. A superintendent shared,

“I become more concerned with liability protection of our employees. Additional legal protection for our staff on the ‘front line’ would be a help to many. Especially in our small rural areas where administrators are doing everything.”

Consider legal improvements for serious consequences related to threatening behavior. Superintendents collectively ask for increased consequences,

“Clear legal consequences help protect individuals and communities by deterring these harmful actions. When students (or parents) know there are serious repercussions for posting and/or re-posting threats, they are less likely to engage in such behavior. A law could hold individuals accountable for their actions. This ensures that those who threaten others understand the seriousness of their behavior and the impact it can have on victims and the broader community. With legal ramifications it can help prevent escalation. By addressing threats early, we can intervene before they become viral.”

Ensuring the guaranteed long-term sustainability of funding for school security is vital for school leaders to create safe learning environments where students can thrive. Consistent financial support allows schools to implement and maintain comprehensive security measures, including hiring qualified personnel, upgrading infrastructure, and investing in advanced technology. Long-term funding not only enhances immediate safety protocols but also enables schools to develop proactive strategies that address evolving security challenges. By securing stable resources, districts can establish ongoing training programs for staff and law enforcement, foster collaborative relationships with community agencies, and support mental health personnel that contribute to overall student well-being. In an era where threats to school safety are increasingly prevalent, a commitment to sustained funding is essential for building resilience and ensuring that all students and staff can feel secure within their educational environments.

Support for expanding training opportunities related to immersive safety scenarios is needed. The Pennsylvania School Safety Institute (PennSSI) provides those who are tasked with keeping students and staff safe with immersive scenarios and classroom trainings, and works to equip individuals with the skills to address emerging security threats that may occur in school buildings. After recently attending a training at PennSSI, I was quickly convinced that it was the best school safety training experience that I have ever engaged in. Reservations for school teams fill quickly and are currently booking deep into 2025. With only one facility in the Commonwealth, located in Mechanicsburg, and the limited availability, an investment in replicating this type of experience for schools across the Commonwealth to have easier repetitive access is a strong desire.

Lastly, I must again stress the importance of fully funding the legal mandate enacted this school year that requires each district to have at least one full-time school security personnel on duty during each school day. It's important to recognize that the legislative discussion of providing each district with \$50,000 (if funded) for this requirement, falls drastically short of actual costs. The total cost of one School Resource Officer for NESD is approximately \$150,000.

On behalf of our students, communities, and all Pennsylvanians concerned with the climbing rate of mental health scenarios facing our children, and the need for continuous funding for school safety efforts, I would like to thank this governing body and ask for full consideration of this testimony. Making a commitment to increased sustainable funding and legal enhancements can decrease the growing incidence of school safety events, which will allow our school leaders to focus on their primary mission; ensuring that children in the Commonwealth have the constitutionally protected right to learn, grow, and thrive, absent from distraction.

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House Education Committee
Public Hearing on School Safety and Security
Thursday, October 10, 2024

Testimony of Michael Pennington, Executive Director
Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD)

My name is Michael Pennington, and I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). Thank you for the opportunity to share the work being done at PCCD and throughout the Commonwealth to foster safe, secure learning environments in our schools.

As Pennsylvania's justice planning and policymaking agency, PCCD oversees a wide range of programs and initiatives designed to increase the safety of Pennsylvania's communities. For more than six years, PCCD has housed Pennsylvania's School Safety and Security Committee (SSSC), which was created by Act 44 of 2018 to oversee school safety related initiatives and grant funding for the Commonwealth. As school safety is a multi-faceted, multidisciplinary issue, the SSSC is made up of appointed representatives from the various state agencies that play a role in addressing school mental health and physical security needs – including PCCD, the Attorney General's Office, the Departments of Education (PDE) and Human Services (DHS), the State Police (PSP), and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) – as well as local stakeholders representing school administration, security professionals, and others.

Since its inception, the SSSC and PCCD have been tasked by state law¹ with a significant and evolving set of school safety-related deliverables, including the following:

- Issuing over \$600 million in school safety grant funding to support both physical security enhancements and behavioral health improvements in both public and nonpublic schools throughout Pennsylvania.
- Creating physical security assessment criteria standards that schools can use to assess security strengths and vulnerabilities of their facilities and make recommendations for improvements.
- Developing behavioral health assessment criteria standards that schools can use to evaluate their current mental and behavioral health services, policies, and trainings and to inform schools on any gaps in their needs.
- Establishing an assessor registry, which schools can refer to for an expert to conduct assessments that meet the Committee's standards.

¹ PA Public School Code, Article XIII-B (School Safety and Security), Article XIII-C (School Security), Article XIII-E (Threat Assessment).

- Establishing an approved security vendor list, which schools can utilize for school security personnel that meets PA School Code training requirements under Article XIII-C.
- Developing National Association of School Resource Officer (NASRO) training equivalent standards as well as evaluating and approving alternative training opportunities for school security personnel.
- Creating model procedures and guidelines as well as training and informational materials for schools on threat assessment teams and threat assessments, generally, as required under Article XIII-E of the PA Public School Code.
- Developing a model trauma-informed approaches to education plan for schools.
- As required by Act 55 of 2022, developing and offering free annual training options to over 250,000 public school employees on situational awareness, trauma-informed approaches, behavioral health awareness, suicide and bullying awareness, substance use awareness, and emergency training drills and behavioral threats.
- Developing and implementing free, mandated annual training that all school safety and security coordinators must take to serve in that role.
- Conducting regular, confidential surveys of school entities and collecting information from school safety coordinators about the status of their school safety needs to help inform the work of the SSSC.

Most recently, Act 33 of 2023 established an Executive Committee within the SSSC, responsible for reviewing current and emerging school safety issues, including data from the Safe2Say Something program, collaborative county-level school safety efforts, bystander reporting, crisis intervention, emergency preparedness, and strategies for preventing threats in schools. The Executive Committee meets every two months and is comprised of representatives from the Office of Attorney General, PDE, PSP, PEMA, and the legislature.

More information about all of these programs can be found on PCCD's [School Safety and Security webpage](#).

Advancing Evidence-Based School Violence Prevention Programs

Like many state-level school safety centers, PCCD's School Safety and Security Committee was formed in response to a high-profile school tragedy.² Since its beginnings, much of the Committee's efforts have focused on identifying and advancing evidence-based practices that can prevent school-based violence through an organized, centralized approach.

Decades of research on behavioral threat assessment and management have shown that early detection and intervention are critical for identifying at-risk individuals, preventing violence in schools, and protecting students and staff. Threat assessment is a multidisciplinary, fact-based process used to assess and intervene with individuals whose behaviors indicate a threat to themselves, others, facilities, and the broader community. Research shows that systematic

² Joseph McKenna et al., [States' School Safety Centers: A Brief Look Into History, Characteristics, and Activities](#), WestEd Justice & Prevention Center, 2021.

approaches to gather, respond to, and document threat information through the threat assessment process can effectively reduce violence.³

Since the 2021-22 school year, all public-school entities in Pennsylvania have been required to establish at least one threat assessment team and adopt related policies, procedures, and practices. PCCD has developed extensive resources to support the ongoing implementation of school-based threat assessment initiatives, including the [PCCD Threat Assessment Model Procedures and Guidelines \(2nd Edition, 2022\)](#), as well as guidance and communication templates for school entities. PCCD is currently working to release a 3rd edition of the model procedures and guidelines based on gaps identified through an end-of-school-year survey that was conducted earlier this year.

Since 2021, PCCD has supported Pennsylvania’s first statewide K-12 Threat Assessment Team Training and Technical Assistance Network, launched through a federal grant to RSM Corporation. So far, nearly 4,300 school Threat Assessment Team members and professionals have been trained. RSM has conducted 35 free, full-day training sessions in-person for 1,220 attendees, and 20 advanced scenario-based sessions for 543 participants. These half-day sessions utilize case studies relevant to areas of concern raised by the school entity requesting supports and are more advanced than the full-day foundational course. RSM also developed additional standalone training modules on topics like violence risk factors and conducting threat assessments.

A U.S. Secret Service analysis of 67 averted plots of targeted school violence found that 92% were discovered and stopped because the plotter either communicated their intent, behaved unusually, or both, and someone reported it to authorities.⁴ In two-thirds of targeted school violence cases, warning signs went unreported by bystanders.⁵

Effective bystander reporting programs, with clear reporting methods and intervention processes, are critical to the threat assessment process and can prevent targeted violence.⁶ Pennsylvania has one such program – the Safe2Say Something program established by Act 44 of 2018 – which is an anonymous 24/7 tip-line run by the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General. Since January 2019, it has received more than 146,513 tips from students and other active bystanders sharing information about potential concerns, including 32,873 during the 2023-24 school year.⁷

Bullying and cyberbullying were the most reported issues to Safe2Say, up 25% from the previous year. Alarming, reports of “Threat Against Person” increased by 64%, with over 1,300 reports. The tip-line also helped recover 35 weapons and received more than 1,100 reports of “Threat Against Schools” during the same period.⁸

³ [National Institute of Justice. School Safety: Research on Gathering Tips and Addressing Threats.](#)

⁴ [Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools | United States Secret Service](#)

⁵ [U.S. Secret Service. Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence.](#)

⁶ [U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Secret Service. Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs.](#)

⁷ [Safe2Say Something Annual Report: 2023-2024 School Year, Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General.](#)

⁸ [Safe2Say Something Annual Report: 2023-2024 School Year, Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General.](#)

Expanding Access to Trained School Security Personnel

In addition to robust threat assessment and bystander reporting systems, schools also rely on trained security personnel to increase safety. School security personnel include school resource officers (SROs), school police officers (SPOs), and school security guards. SPOs are law enforcement officers hired by schools or third-party vendors, appointed by a county judge, and designated by the school entity's board or administration.⁹ SROs are law enforcement officers commissioned and employed by a law enforcement agency assigned to schools through an agreement between both entities.¹⁰ School security guards, employed by a school or third-party vendors, provide security services but lack police powers.¹¹

School security personnel serve as both crime prevention officers who can help shape school entity policy and practice¹² and, when trained to address the unique needs of youth and the specific dynamics of a school setting, can also play a key role as mentors for students.¹³ To ensure that officers are appropriately prepared and equipped to meet these demands, all school security personnel in Pennsylvania must complete the Basic School Resource Officer (SRO) Course offered by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) or an approved equivalent course in accordance with Act 67 of 2019. PCCD also maintains a list of approved third-party vendors for school security guard services. Additionally, starting in the 2024-25 school year, Act 55 of 2024 required school districts to have at least one full-time security personnel per district, on duty, during the school day. PCCD is currently developing guidance and a website for the new requirement, which will be released in the next few weeks.

Establishing Standards for School Safety & Mental Health in Pennsylvania

Since FY22-23, the PA School Code has required that school safety grant funding should first be used for activities that address a school's most basic safety and mental health needs before being used for more advanced practices. The School Safety and Security Committee's [Behavioral Health and Physical Security Criteria](#) guides this process, by sorting training, policies, equipment and programs into levels one to three, with level one being the most basic requirements.

The SSSC's revised Physical Security Baseline Criteria includes conducting physical security assessments of school buildings and surrounding areas, implementing campus and classroom security measures, and coordinating with local law enforcement. Schools must also establish secured communication systems, adopt emergency preparedness plans as required by law, and provide annual safety training for staff, along with ongoing specialized training.

The SSSC's Behavioral Health Baseline Criteria includes conducting a Student Assistance and Behavioral Health Support Assessment and establishing a Student Assistance Program (SAP), offering mental health services (such as a school counseling program). Schools should also

⁹ [School Safety and Security Guidance Related to Security Personnel. Pennsylvania Department of Education.](#)

¹⁰ [School Safety and Security Guidance Related to Security Personnel. Pennsylvania Department of Education.](#)

¹¹ [School Safety and Security Guidance Related to Security Personnel. Pennsylvania Department of Education.](#)

¹² [Guiding Principles for School Resource Officer Programs \(usdoj.gov\)](#)

¹³ [Guiding Principles for School Resource Officer Programs \(usdoj.gov\)](#)

conduct regular school climate surveys, train staff in de-escalation techniques, develop a trauma-informed approach plan, and establish a threat assessment team.

Looking Ahead: Current Trends & Recommendations

Despite the Commonwealth's significant progress in school safety programs and policies since 2018, there are still critical areas that need further attention to fully protect and support students and staff. A recent Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) survey of educators and leaders identified student mental health as the top challenge in education this year, with nearly half of students needing services and support.¹⁴ Key barriers include a scarcity of providers, stigma and reluctance to seek help, and lack of funding.¹⁵ Threat assessment teams are crucial for identifying and intervening with students in crisis, but must work in tandem with strong mental and behavioral health services.¹⁶ Pennsylvania's student-to-counselor ratio of 331:1 far exceeds the American School Counselor Association's recommended ratio of 250:1,¹⁷ and some schools still struggle with mental health assessments¹⁸ and threat assessment team confidence due to insufficient support.

To address these challenges, PCCD and the School Safety and Security Committee are committed to continuing to evaluate and revise school safety trainings, guidelines, and baseline criteria based on the needs and feedback of schools, law enforcement, and other stakeholders. To improve its threat assessment-related programming, PCCD and RSM recently collected nearly 750 survey responses from school-based threat assessment team members. The survey revealed that 88 percent of surveyed school entities have an active Threat Assessment Team, but only 38% of respondents felt highly skilled in collaborating with non-school based law enforcement, and just 37% in reporting threats or sharing information under FERPA and HIPAA protocols. Schools without active teams expressed less confidence in meeting legal requirements, highlighting the need for more support in these areas. Based on the findings, PCCD and RSM are updating training content and addressing identified gaps. Action steps PCCD is considering in collaboration with its partners include enhancing training on law enforcement collaboration, threat reporting, and information sharing.

To address identified gaps in school safety and security and ensure sustainable funding, we encourage state policymakers to continue to prioritize investment in the fundamentals of school safety, such as comprehensive support for mental health services, training and tools to facilitate bystander reporting (e.g., Safe2Say Something), enhancing threat assessment teams through training and technical assistance, and promoting safe school climates. Physical security measures are most effective with regular staff training and combining them with behavioral health strategies is key to maintaining safe school environments and preventing violence. In addition, providing predictable, long-term levels of funding allows school entities to confidently budget for school safety needs each year. In addition, maintaining non-competitive, formula-based approaches keeps schools from having to compete for critical funding.

¹⁴ [2024 State of Education. Pennsylvania School Boards Association.](#)

¹⁵ [2024 State of Education. Pennsylvania School Boards Association.](#)

¹⁶ [2nd Edition - PCCD Threat Assessment Model Procedures and Guidelines \(2022\)](#)

¹⁷ [Student-to-School-Counselor Ratio 2022-2023. American School Counselor Association.](#)

¹⁸ [PCCD K12 Threat Assessment Technical Assistance Training Network Survey Report \(2023-24\)](#)

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's investments in evidence-based prevention programs and physical security measures significantly improved the landscape of school safety, and PCCD remains committed to collaborating with the General Assembly and other partners in this essential work to continue building on this progress in the years ahead.

PENNSYLVANIA STATE POLICE

HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING

OCTOBER 10, 2024



Good morning, Chairman Schweyer and members of the House Education Committee. The Pennsylvania State Police (PSP) appreciates the opportunity to offer remarks on the efforts of the PSP Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Team (RVAT) to support the safety and security of the schools in our Commonwealth.

The PSP RVAT is a group of sworn Troopers who are trained to conduct professional risk and vulnerability assessments. RVAT initially became operational in April of 2004. Since its inception, RVAT has expanded to 18 full-time members consisting of 1 Sergeant, 3 Corporals, and 14 Troopers. RVAT is divided into three regions – west, central, and east. Each region is comprised of six unit members. Each RVAT member is required to attend the two-week Physical Security Training Program provided by the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center. Each member is also required to successfully obtain their Physical Security Professional board certification from the American Society for Industrial Security, or “ASIS.” These certifications meet the criteria established for RVAT members to be considered qualified assessors under Article XIII-B, Section 1307-B of the Public School Code of 1949. Over the last four years, RVAT has averaged 400 assessments a year.

The mission of RVAT is to assist with the safety and security of schools and universities, government buildings, private facilities, critical infrastructure and key resources, houses of worship, and pre-planned events. This mission is accomplished through professional risk and vulnerability assessments, consisting of comprehensive examination and evaluation of physical facilities and operational procedures. An assessment aims to identify critical assets and vulnerabilities to a wide range of potential threats. It also includes options which may be considered to improve the security posture

of the facility and to better mitigate the noted vulnerabilities. "Options for consideration" are mitigation suggestions or strategies presented to the stakeholder to improve the safety and security of the facility and occupants. These can range from something as simple as trimming overgrown vegetation to improve site lines, or more complex suggestions such as the installation of a video surveillance system or bollards to prevent vehicle intrusion into the facility. These suggestions are not meant to be all encompassing. The goal of these improvement options is to provide mitigation strategies for undesirable events and to provide means to deter or prevent an intrusion, delay an intruder, mitigate damage and loss of life, and provide methods to expedite the notification to authorities. Specific areas reviewed during an assessment include parking areas, access control, video surveillance systems, lighting, mail handling procedures, HVAC and utilities, emergency preparedness, facility communications, visitor and employee screening procedures, and overall perimeter and facility security.

When an assessment is requested by a school administration in particular, an administrator is provided basic paperwork to facilitate an official request for an assessment. Following the paperwork submission, the official request is logged and forwarded to the appropriate RVAT supervisor holding the rank of corporal for the regional unit that covers the school's location. The RVAT supervisor adds the school facility to the assessment list. School assessments are ranked in order of the school entities' market value/income aid ratio from high to low, as required under Section 1307-B of the Public School Code. As the time for the assessment approaches, the assigned Trooper will contact the school administrator to schedule the assessment, which generally takes two days to complete, though the timeframe is dependent on the size of the facility. The

assessment includes portions of the review of assessment areas of the facility both during the day and at night. Once the assessment report is complete, it is forwarded to and reviewed with the school administration.

The RVAT team is currently exploring methods by which they can remain engaged with schools beyond simply conducting an assessment, such as providing training opportunities to school administrators, school resource officers, and school employees on ways to identify threats and risks related to student behavior. RVAT members also provide presentations regarding the function of the unit at various locations throughout the year.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with information on the function of the PSP's RVAT as it relates to school safety and security. We look forward to participating in future discussions.



House of Representatives – Education Committee Hearing: School Safety and Security

Testimony of High School Counselor Dr. Adam Oldham, LPC, NCSC, PSCA Government Relations

October 10, 2024

Chairman Schwyer, Chairman Topper, members of the committee – thank you for hosting this hearing on school safety and security, and for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am Dr. Adam Oldham, a full-time high school counselor at the Big Spring High School in Cumberland County. I am also the President of the School Counselor Section at PSEA, Past-President of the Capital Area School Counselors Association, and former Board Director and current chair of Government Relations for the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association. I come to you today as one of over 5,000 school counselors who work across Pennsylvania in our public-school districts, our cyber/charter schools, our career and technical schools, and our Intermediate Units who serve our nonpublic schools.

As clearly as I can state it, if Pennsylvania genuinely desires to support student health and safety, **Pennsylvania must ensure our schools have adequate student services staffing and programming.**

The Safe2Say Something initiative, which launched in 2018 with the intent of reducing school violence, has overwhelmingly been used to report concerns about student mental health¹.

According to the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), one in four Pennsylvania students report feeling like a failure, and one in six students report seriously considering suicide².

In 2021, the US Surgeon General released a public health advisory on youth mental health saying – “The challenges today’s generation of young people face are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate. And the effect these challenges have had on their mental health is devastating.”³

As we saw in the 10 years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health among students overall continues to worsen, with more than 40% of high school students feeling so sad or hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year—a possible indication of the experience of depressive symptoms. We also saw significant increases in the percentage of youth who seriously considered suicide, made a suicide plan, and attempted suicide.⁴

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, with up to 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 in the US with a reported mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder.⁵

In 2016, of the 7.7 million children with treatable mental health disorder, about half did not receive adequate treatment.⁶

¹ Office of the Attorney General (2024). Safe2Say something annual report 2023-2024 school year.

² PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency (2024). 2023 PA Youth Survey (PAYS) State of Pennsylvania.

³ US Surgeon General (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The US surgeon general’s advisory*.

⁴ CDC (2023). Youth risk behavior survey: Data summary & trends report [2011-2021].

⁵ Perou, R., Bitsko, R. H., Blumberg, S. J., Pastor, P., Ghandour, R. M., Gfroerer, J. C., Hedden, S. L., Crosby, A. E., Visser, S. N., Schieve, L. A., Parks, S. E., Hall, J. E., Brody, D., Simile, C. M., Thompson, W. W., Baio, J., Avenevoli, S., Kogan, M. D., Huang, L. N., & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013). Mental health surveillance among children—United States, 2005-2011. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Supplements*, 62(2), 1–35.

⁶ Whitney, D.G. & Peterson, M. (2019). US national and state-level prevalence of mental health disorders and disparities of mental health care use in children. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 173(4), 389-391. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.5399

This is not to say that schools should not establish programs and systems to prevent school violence, but doing so without ensuring our schools have adequate student services staffing and programming is failing to address root causes of school violence.

Moreover, the challenges and barriers students and families face accessing treatment outside of school mean that schools are left to deal with these unaddressed needs throughout the school day.

Whether or not schools are equipped to deal with these unaddressed needs, these needs impact the learning environment for both the students experiencing them, and for their peers and the adults responsible for educating them.

It is the law in Pennsylvania that “each school entity shall prepare a written plan for the implementation of a **comprehensive and integrated K-12 program of student services** based on the needs of its students.”⁷

Recognizing that students may experience barriers that limit their ability to fully engage with learning and their school experience, Pennsylvania student services professionals are trained, certified, and employed to address student developmental needs throughout their enrollment in school.

Developmental services include [school] **counseling, psychological services, health services, home and school visitor services and social work services** that support students in addressing their academic, behavioral, health, personal and social development needs.⁸

Despite this law being on the books since 2005, schools have not had the staff to effectively deliver these services, and a lack of meaningful accountability from the state has allowed an unconstitutional level of variety in the quality or even the existence of these services from one school district to the next.

Then Attorney General Shapiro in 2022 echoed this sentiment in an amicus curiae brief his office filed in support of the petitioners in the school funding lawsuit⁹:

*The evidence shows that certain districts **are unable to hire an adequate number of school counselors and social workers** to meet the needs of their students. **No one can seriously dispute that...access to counselors and mental health resources...are necessary elements of a thorough and efficient education.** Yet the evidence demonstrated that Petitioners and other public school districts **lack the resources to provide these necessary elements.***

I agree with our Governor – **student services are necessary elements of a thorough and efficient education**, and many school districts lack the resources to provide them.

One strategy of funding to increase the number of student services professionals in our schools is the use of year-to-year grant funding, and examples of this include uses of the School Safety and Security Funds via the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD)¹⁰, or the ESSER/ARP funds¹¹ that were provided during the pandemic.

⁷ 22 Pa. Code Chapter 12.41.a

⁸ 22 Pa. Code Chapter 12.41.b(1)

⁹ PA Office of the Attorney General (2022). Brief for the petitioners as amicus curiae. <https://www.attorneygeneral.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-05-17-William-Penn-v.-PDE-Shapiro-Amicus-Brief.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Pages/School-Safety-and-Security-Grants-Program.aspx>

¹¹ <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/CARESAct/Pages/default.aspx>

Over the last several years, Pennsylvania has allocated hundreds of millions of dollars to supporting student mental health and school safety through the PCCD grant process.

To help school districts identify uses for state safety and security grants, the PCCD School Safety and Security Committee produced a set of Behavioral Health and School Climate criteria¹² to establish a “baseline” for what safe, secure learning environments look like. The best practices identified in these criteria for behavioral health include appropriate ratios for school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers.

That said, in May 2023, this committee updated their baseline criteria, **which removed these ratios for student services professionals from both the Level I and Level II baseline**¹³. What were the baseline criteria that were removed?

- School entity has at least one full-time school counselor for each level (elementary, middle, high)
- School entity has at least one full-time school nurse
- School entity has at least one full-time school psychologist
- School entity has at least one full-time school social worker

And yet, when PCCD surveyed schools across Pennsylvania as part of Act 55 in 2022, the number one resource identified by a **WIDE margin** to improve mental health in our schools was **additional funding to hire staff**¹⁴.

Why would we remove a best practice of having student services professionals in our schools? Those baseline criteria were already a pretty low bar – one school nurse or school counselor per school entity, for example, might mean that those individuals are running between multiple buildings, despite having hundreds or even thousands of children relying on the services they provide.

A lack of money – a lack of sustainable money – has long been cited as the reason why Pennsylvania can’t do anything about student services staffing in our schools. PCCD knew it couldn’t establish a baseline expectation for Behavioral Health and School Climate without providing sustainable funding to make it happen.

Fortunately, in response to the Commonwealth Court decision which found Pennsylvania’s school funding system unconstitutional, the state delivered over one billion dollars in new funding for the 24-25 school year¹⁵.

One of the specific uses of this money listed in the guidance from the state is **student services infrastructure**.

We need to stop making vague platitudes about “school mental health” and “safety and security” – we need to invest in our established student services infrastructure. This means explicitly school-employed school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers.

¹² PCCD (2021). Baseline criteria – PCCD school safety and security committee. Behavioral health and school climate. <https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Documents/Assessment%20Criteria/Behavioral%20Health%20Baseline%20Criteria.pdf>

¹³ PCCD (2023). Crosswalk of Revised vs. Original Behavioral Health Baseline Criteria <https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Documents/CROSSWALK%20-%20Revised%20vs%20Original%20SSSC%20Behavioral%20Health%20Baseline%20Criteria%20Standards.pdf>

¹⁴ PCCD (2022). FY22-23 school mental health survey results. [https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Documents/School%20Mental%20Health%20Survey%20Aggregate%20Data%20and%20Findings%20\(September%202022\).pdf](https://www.pccd.pa.gov/schoolsafety/Documents/School%20Mental%20Health%20Survey%20Aggregate%20Data%20and%20Findings%20(September%202022).pdf)

¹⁵ SB 1001

Not a contract with a private contractor. Not “Mr. or Ms. So and So” who comes in on Tuesdays. Not “what’s your insurance we can see if there are slots available.” Not “we’ll make every teacher do a training on mental health.”

This tendency to dismiss student services - a specific set of highly qualified professionals who are trained, certified, and hired to deliver a set of effective services and programs - to talk about generalized "school mental health" or "therapy" or "safety and security" misses the mark.

And it also devalues the individuals who work in these disciplines, which exacerbates the workforce issue, as people choose not to work in schools.

This is a real shame, because as a school counselor, I love the work I get to do with students and families and other educators – this is an incredible career opportunity to make a huge difference in the lives of children.

It’s hard to sell that vision when it’s not just about money or working conditions. It’s also constantly overlooking these local and state policy conversations that ignore our qualifications, training, certification, and expertise – that we aren’t worth acknowledging as a solution to the student mental health crisis or to school improvement efforts, despite being specifically trained to work with these needs.

If Pennsylvania wants to be serious about addressing school safety and security or student mental health, **we need to invest in Chapter 12 student services. Full stop.**

If Pennsylvania can require every school to hire an armed security officer, Pennsylvania can deliver on the promises it makes on paper and make sure kids have enough school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers to deliver organized and effective student services programming.

This isn’t really an innovation – we’ve had rules on the books in some form or fashion for delivering student services in our schools since the 1970s at least.

For years the excuse was “well, there’s no money.”

Now there’s money.

It’s time to hold schools accountable for delivering student services in an effective, efficient manner.

We already employ approximately 10,000 student services professionals here in the Commonwealth¹⁶ – let’s make sure we’re designing and implementing these services in a way that gets us the return on investment we know they can deliver for our kids.

¹⁶ PDE (2024). Professional personnel individual staff report.

<https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/ProfSupPers/Pages/ProfPersIndStaff.aspx>



TESTIMONY OF THE

PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

OCTOBER 10, 2024

ON SCHOOL SAFETY AND SECURITY

Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to provide written testimony on the critically important topic of school safety and security.

Students cannot learn in an environment that is not safe and secure. Teachers cannot teach in an environment that is not safe and secure. Parents should know that when they send their student to school that their student is safe. That is why school leaders and school boards around the state continue to make school safety and security a high priority.

School safety and security presents a number of challenges for school leaders. We want to highlight some of the biggest and then explain how PSBA is assisting these leaders in ensuring quality safety and security measures are occurring across the Commonwealth.

First is the surge in student mental health needs since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although student mental health issues were beginning to rise before the pandemic, those needs have drastically increased since. Addressing the mental health needs of students that impact their ability to learn was rated as the biggest instructional challenge facing school leaders in the 2024 *State of Education* Report. But mental health issues not only impact students' ability to learn, but also present challenges related to student behavior and discipline. Changes in student behaviors with ties to mental health include increases in incidents related to bullying/cyberbullying and controlled substances (including nicotine/vaping).

Second, and somewhat connected to mental health, are issues related to social media. Especially in the last few years, school leaders have been forced to cancel school, contact law enforcement, and make other changes to their educational programs due to social media. Even though many of the social media threats that schools receive are investigated and determined to not be credible, schools cannot take them lightly. School leaders are forced to treat every threat as serious until proven otherwise. This means schools are shut down and learning is not occurring during these times. While social media has frequently been a source of school threats, it has also been a source of information for schools to thwart threats or other security incidents that happen in or at schools. The inability to escape the seemingly 24/7 onslaught of student devices has fed into a circle of on-going mental health needs in our schools.

Third are school facilities issues. A basic part of school safety and security is the physical school building where students and staff attend and work. However, nearly three-quarters (71.4%) of superintendents stated that one or more of their school district's buildings were in need of major repair or replacement in the 2023 *State of Education* report. Health and safety upgrades were a commonly cited reason for school buildings to be considered in need of repair or renovation.

Fourth are school staffing issues. The focus on school safety and security has led to a number of new mandates, especially related to training and reporting, as well as the need for increased staffing related to safety and security. For example, Act 44 of 2018 created the Safe2Say Something program which requires school leaders and staff to respond to reports from the Safe2Say Something tipline. As valuable as the program is and has been, it was not paired with additional resources needed to fulfill the obligations required under the law. Also, the recently enacted Act 55 of 2024 now requires all school entities to employ at least one school security personnel who is trained according to the requirements of law.

All of these challenges impact the interactions the school district has with students, staff and the community. These challenges, mainly the on-going mandates, limit the flexibility of school leaders to allocate resources where they could see the biggest impact. PSBA and its members are extremely grateful for the contributions from the state government to address school safety and security as well as student mental health needs in the last several years. Without these vital investments, our public schools would not be as safe as they are now. Despite these investments, school districts are often forced to rely on local taxpayers to fund school safety and security improvements. While this does help maintain local control, there is more the state could do.

Throughout PSBA's 129-year history we have stepped in to fill the voids and provide resources to accomplish goals of the time, school safety and security is no different. The Pennsylvania School Safety Institute (PennSSI) offers a range of options to support schools, which include classroom instruction in addressing safety and security incidents, school-based immersive scenarios to navigate in collaboration with law enforcement partners, bi-annual Safety Summits to hear from experts and the Stop the Prop campaign which has issued over 130,000 complimentary stickers to public schools to improve the local practices of keeping doors locked. PSBA also offers 24-hour crisis and time-sensitive communications support to help districts navigate communications in challenging times. PennSSI has also partnered with Millersville University to offer a Certificate in School Safety Preparedness.

PSBA's recommended policy guides related to threat assessment and response are based on state laws and regulations and guidance from the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency and the Safe2Say Something Program. Schools have specific requirements outlined in law for establishing threat assessment teams, working with law enforcement agencies, and developing procedures and teams to respond to reports made through the Safe2Say Something program.

School teams coordinate with law enforcement agencies based on laws and regulations and the memorandum of understanding that each school district has with their local law enforcement agencies. They work together to respond to reports submitted through the Safe2Say Something program as well as to address other reported threats and areas of concern on a case-by-case basis.

The state's School Safety and Security Committee, which is a part of the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency, oversees grant funding, training requirements and provides guidance and resources on many aspects of school safety and security. The School Safety and Security Committee has been a valuable resource in helping schools address continuing and emerging threats to school safety and security.

Every school district is unique in their safety personnel, law enforcement coverage, facilities and other safety related considerations. Therefore, PSBA urges the General Assembly to continue to review evidence-based practices and issue new laws or guidance based off of what we learn so that school personnel are prepared for the myriad of safety and security challenges they face. However, we ask that laws, regulations and policies related to school safety and security strike the difficult balance of state oversight and funding with local control to properly allocate resources.



PA HOUSE DEMS

Media Toolkit

TALKING POINTS – School Safety:

- This is about school safety.
- This is about making sure our kids and educators can go to school without fearing for their lives or the lives of others.
- This is about ensuring parents have peace of mind that their kids are learning in a safe environment.
- This is about making sure our kids know who to contact and where to go when they reach what they feel is an irreversible crisis.
- With the all-encompassing effect of social media on our young people, it is imperative that we ensure their safety and take threats seriously.
- When we're talking about school resource officers in rural areas, we're talking about trained professionals who can help identify a crisis before it happens.
 - Suicide rates for 15-to-19-year-olds have jumped by almost a third in the past 10 years.
 - Boys make up 80% of the youth suicide deaths, and 90% of them use a gun
 - Pennsylvania suffers two gun suicides each day, with the highest rates in Wayne, Elk, Carbon, Clarion, Schuylkill & Clearfield counties being atop the list.
- Bullies aren't born, they're created and right now, 1 in 5 high schoolers report being bullied in schools.
 - Recent studies have put Pennsylvania on the map as the 6th worst state when it comes to bullying and cyberbullying problems both in school and out.
- We know the impact trauma has on young brains - causing learning and mental health disorders, health complications, and more interactions with the criminal justice system.
 - Exposure to six or more adverse childhood experiences, also known as ACES, can reduce life expectancy by 20 years. Twenty years.
- Our kids need help. Our educators need help. Parents need help.
- Schools **must** be equipped with the tools they need to identify, prevent, and respond to crises – lives depend on it.