



**Testimony of the  
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Presented to the  
Senate Education Committee and the Senate Military  
Preparedness Committee  
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**By  
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Chairman Folmer, Chairwoman Baker, and other members of the Senate Education Committee and Senate Military Preparedness Committee, thank you for convening this hearing today on the critical issue of school safety. My name is Michael J. Crossey and I am a teacher in the Keystone Oaks School District currently serving as President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association. On behalf of PSEA's 187,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

It's been two months since the Sandy Hook tragedy but of course it continues to weigh heavily on all of our minds. There is no doubt that all of us are giving more thought as to how to keep our children and our educators safe from harm's way. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators have the right to expect their schools to be safe havens of learning but Sandy Hook reminds us all more must be done to make that expectation a reality.

While there is much debate nationally about how to prevent gun violence in the wake of this tragedy, as educators we are focused more on providing a positive learning environment for our children and what strategies and supports must be implemented to ensure such an environment.

Two years ago, PSEA released its *Solutions That Work* ([www.solutionsthatworkpa.org](http://www.solutionsthatworkpa.org)), a blueprint for change in Pennsylvania's public schools. All of the plan's initiatives are grounded in firsthand knowledge, supported by research, and tested in practice by educators who know what works and what doesn't in their schools and classrooms.

In the area of school safety, *Solutions That Work* affirms the need for a multi-pronged, sustainable approach to ensuring safe learning environments for students and educators on an ongoing basis—and not just in the aftermath of the last tragedy. These strategies include greater access to mental health services for students; greater coordination between schools, law enforcement, and social service agencies to address the unique needs of students at risk; providing quality alternative placements for disruptive and potentially violent students; and improving bullying prevention.

Before I outline the specific recommendations from our *Solutions that Work* proposal, PSEA has additional recommendations for the Committees' consideration based on years of discussing this

critical issue with our members on the front lines. At the state level we believe it is important for school safety to be reviewed consistently and with experts in the field. Therefore we recommend the creation of a statewide, broad-based advisory committee under the Office of Safe Schools to work with various state agencies to ensure an ongoing dialogue and review of the strategies and supports the state can offer to prevent violence and improve school climate for all of PA's communities. One concrete responsibility for this committee could be the creation of, and ongoing updates to, a model safe school plan for every school district in PA to utilize as a guide in its planning. It should also be required that every school district have a safe school plan that contains components recommended by the advisory committee.

In addition to these specific recommendations, the following are strategies we believe should be adopted as part of a multi-pronged approach to increase the safety of our children in our schools.

### **Increased supports for students and families**

Policies should support schools focusing on creating key connections among schools, families, social service agencies, and law enforcement to address the unique needs of students at risk. Students and their families must have ready access to the whole spectrum of supports available to them so that the services of appropriate state, county, and local agencies can be made available.

The following are several policy recommendations the state could adopt to help foster this system of meaningful interaction between parties at the local level:

- Require each school to have a family liaison to facilitate the transmission of information between families and teachers, and be available for parents after normal school hours;
- Require school districts to have social workers on staff and social services readily available to all students, especially those most at risk for academic failure, truancy, and dropping out. School-based social workers should provide professional development to staff members, assist support professionals, and secure necessary resources for students;
- Require more frequent discussion, interaction, and coordination between schools and law enforcement; and

- Require schools to coordinate with social services so students in need of services and assistance receive them in a timely manner.

### **Increase access to mental health services**

Proper diagnosis of mental health needs can and often does start in our schools, yet there are not enough school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists employed in our schools to provide the necessary care to students. Efforts should be made to increase the number of trained mental health professionals, school social workers, and guidance personnel in our schools so that the needs of all students can be appropriately addressed. Increasing the number of qualified school personnel that can identify warning signs, diagnose the issue, and connect the student with services needed such as early intervention or treatment referrals is the type of ongoing, systemic effort that is truly needed.

### **Quality alternative placements for disruptive and potentially violent students to foster their own success and that of their classmates should be addressed.**

Schools should have the ability to place students who are consistently disruptive and potentially violent in high-quality alternative settings including alternative education programs or other schools that can meet the student's academic, behavioral, and emotional needs while also providing job training. Appropriate training should be provided for the administrators and teachers in these alternative settings so they are better prepared for working with and teaching students with unique needs.

**Students should be provided with the training and resources to communicate with adults about bullying, threats, or other abusive behavior—including gang violence.** While the circumstances differ for tragic school shootings such as the one at Sandy Hook, bullying can certainly be a factor leading to the violence. Yet the incidents of bullying that occur regularly in today's schools are far more likely to contribute to students' and teachers' overall sense of safety, or lack thereof, than the major incidents of school violence that we hear about on the news.

As noted in our testimony before the House Education Committee last October regarding bullying, PSEA supports the following recommendations to improve bullying prevention efforts in our schools:

- Require high-quality training for all school employees (including school bus drivers and food service workers) to provide the tools necessary to recognize bullying and intervene.
- Require school districts to establish a mechanism—either a hotline or suggestion box (physical or online via the district’s website)—to allow for anonymous tips of bullying to be investigated as well as ideas to create a more positive school climate overall.
- Require schools to adopt programs that deal with conflict resolution, anger management, anti-bullying, and self-esteem.
- Consider implementing stricter dress codes and/or uniforms in schools with gang activity or increased violence, which can alter the school climate in a positive way.
- Require schools to establish a School Safety Committee comprised of students, parents, community members, teachers, support professionals, pupil services personnel, and administrators to cooperatively develop and implement a plan for establishing and maintaining safety in their schools.
- Require schools to provide students with the tools and resources to know how to communicate with adults about rumors, threats, or abusive behavior. These tools and resources include school-wide anti-bullying, anti-cyber-bullying, conflict resolution, and peer mediation programs, as well as access to counselors, social workers, and mentors in the school setting.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these issues of importance with the committees today. I look forward to a continued discussion with you today and beyond.