



Testimony

Senate Education Committee and Senate Veterans & Emergency Preparedness Committee

Joint Public Hearing on School Safety

Pennsylvania Department of Education

Ronald J. Tomalis, Secretary of Education

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Good morning Senators Baker, Folmer, Solobay, Dinniman and other members of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee and Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on school safety. This is an issue of importance to Governor Corbett, the PA Department of Education (PDE) and citizens across the Commonwealth.

As everyone here knows, the nation recently witnessed an unthinkable horror in Newtown, Connecticut. The tragedy of that morning has since generated a national dialogue on school safety. These discussions have cut across many topics, including: school security procedures, law enforcement, mental health, firearms, violent entertainment and video games, and school funding.

The tragedy in Connecticut is an important reminder that it is appropriate to review the policies and procedures in place to ensure our schools are safe for our students. This is why Governor Corbett convened a recent meeting to discuss school safety issues with school leaders from across the Commonwealth.

It is important to note that Pennsylvania schools are safe places for our children. Unfortunately, tragedies and incidents of violence occur in our schools, but thankfully they are rare. Pennsylvania policy-makers must consider all options to help avoid and defend against mass shootings and other violence in our schools, but it is important to understand that each of these tragedies are unique which makes it difficult to predict what the next threat or incident may look like. There is not a perfect solution that protects against all threats.

Each school has unique characteristics including the community in which the school sits, the demographics of the student body, the personnel employed, the building design, school financial resources, existing security features, and many other factors. A “one-size-fits-all approach” to improving school safety simply will not work.

Finally, school safety means a lot more than just protecting against mass horrors such as Sandy Hook. It also means protecting against isolated violence that occurs such as fighting amongst students in schools, bullying and other serious incidents that happen more frequently and affect students on a daily basis. It also means protecting students from educators whose unprofessional conduct put students at risk for harm.

We need to be cognizant that local flexibility is critically important in any decision making process. Local school officials know their buildings, their communities, their student populations, local threats and the school’s resources better than anybody else.

Governor Corbett recognizes the importance of assisting schools in enhancing school safety, while still preserving local flexibility and decision-making. The Governor recently proposed the privatization of our antiquated liquor system, taking the funds received from this divestiture and dedicating it to our children through the educational system. The creation of the Passport for

Learning Block Grant would infuse over a billion dollars of additional funds into public schools, allowing districts to select school safety as one of several grant opportunities. Local officials could determine the necessary programs and services to enhance school security and ensure a safe learning environment. Potential improvements schools could make include providing direct training to school employees, parents, law enforcement officials and communities on effective measures to prevent and combat school violence, using funds to coordinate antiviolence efforts between school, professional, parental, governmental, law enforcement and community organizations and associations, conflict resolution or dispute management training, district-wide school safety and violence prevention plans, and security planning. Funds could also be used for the purchase of security-related technology which may include metal detectors, protective lighting, surveillance equipment, special emergency communications equipment, electronic locksets, deadbolts and theft control devices and training in the use of security-related technology, institution of student, staff and visitor identification systems, including criminal background check software.

In addition, the Governor has proposed the establishment of a dedicated division within the Department of Education to prosecute misconduct by professional educators. This new division will enhance the efficiency with which complaints of educator misconduct can be reviewed and resolved. Funding for this new office will be provided through a \$25 increase in certification application fees. Implementation of this initiative will help to maintain safe learning environments for our students by removing educators who pose a risk to students.

PDE looks forward to working with the General Assembly on the Governor's proposals, as well as other legislation that is under development to improve school safety.

Currently, the Office for Safe Schools (OSS) within PDE annually collects school violence data from all public school entities, and provides many services to local school districts. The following is a summary of the services provided by OSS:

Safe Schools Targeted Grant – This competitive grant administered by the OSS assists schools by providing funding for programs under their comprehensive safe school plans. In recent years, this grant has distributed approximately \$500,000 in annual awards. Some of the purposes for the grant include:

- Conflict resolution or dispute management
- Positive behavior support
- Classroom management
- Violence prevention and anti-bullying
- De-escalation and behavior interventions
- Comprehensive, district-wide school safety measures

Workshops – The OSS, in conjunction with other state agencies and local intermediate units, provides professional development sessions and technical assistance focusing on various safety and security topics, including:

- School staff response to active shooting
- Active shooter training
- De-escalation training
- School bus safety procedures

- Peer mediations
- Parental notification and reunification
- Restorative justice training

MOUs with Local Law Enforcement and First Responders – Every school building must maintain a current MOU with local law enforcement and first responders. The MOUs outline procedures to follow when certain incidents occur on school property, at school-sponsored activities, or during transportation to and from school buildings or school activities. These plans are submitted from the schools to the OSS every two years. Furthermore, the OSS provides technical assistance to schools to help with the MOUs.

Student Assistance Programs (SAP) – All schools are required to have SAPs designed to assist school personnel in identifying student issues including alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and mental health. The Commonwealth's SAP for schools is administered by the OSS in partnership with the Department of Drug and Alcohol and the Department of Public Welfare. These state agencies have funded SAP team member training to over 1300 school personnel since its creation in 2011.

Emergency Procedures – The OSS and PEMA provide technical assistance to schools in the development of various emergency procedures. Although not all of these exercises are mandated, it is recommended schools should conduct various types of exercises such as:

- Fire drills
- School evacuation drills
- Bus evacuation drills
- Reverse evacuation procedures
- Lock-down procedures
- Other functional and full-scale exercises

Other Recommendations of the OSS for Schools – The OSS also recommends the following actions be considered by public schools:

- Single points of entrance, visitor sign-ins, and escorts
- Identification badges for staff, faculty and students
- National Incident Management System (NIMS) training for school leaders
- Bullying prevention programs
- Alternative education programs for disruptive youth

In addition to the specific work of the OSS, there are other programs and resources that exist to help increase school safety across the Commonwealth, including:

Employment of law enforcement or security officers in schools – Public schools may choose to employ law enforcement or security officers in their buildings (School Police Officers, School Security Officers or School Resource Officers); each has a slightly different role. In addition, schools may decide whether these individuals – if properly certified to do so – should carry firearms. Currently, 234 school districts or other local education agencies employ one or more SPO, SSO, or SRO. Out of this number, 131 of these entities also authorize their officers to carry a firearm.

All Hazards/Crisis Response Plan – All school entities are required to have an All Hazards/Crisis Response Plan to establish procedures for all both natural and man-made disasters. PEMA coordinates this activity with schools.

Clearances – Most school personnel are required to secure three separate clearances: Child Abuse, State Police and FBI. The Office of School Services in PDE coordinates the contract with the FBI. The office annually processes approximately 180,000 clearances.

School Safety Audit – Since 2007, the Auditor General’s Office has conducted reviews to ensure public schools have the following:

- A MOU with local law enforcement
- A comprehensive safe-school plan
- A visitation policy and a student, staff and visitor identification policy
- Certain school security features, such as single points of entry and others
- A designated safety officer or crisis manager and a crisis team
- Emergency communications system regularly tested and maintained, along with a back-up system in case of failure
- Safe schools and emergency training for staff, faculty and students

I hope this information is beneficial to both committees, the General Assembly and the general public. I would again like to thank the chairs of the two committees and the members here today for conducting this hearing. The Department of Education, along with Governor Corbett, looks forward to working with you in the 2013/14 Legislative Session on these issues and other matters supporting public education in Pennsylvania.