

Senator Lisa Baker
Public Hearing On School Safety Measures
February 13, 2013

School safety has been the subject of public debate, legislative remedies, and reporting requirements for a long time. However, in the aftermath of the horrific shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Pennsylvania is compelled to re-examine our approaches to school safety.

As shocking and saddening as that tragedy was, the truth remains that students are more at risk from others inside the schools than from an armed intruder. Every day kids are falling victim to bullying, abuse, drugs, and other threats. And there is a grouping of schools listed as persistently dangerous, because they are home to unacceptable levels of violent behavior.

Governor Corbett and Senator Scarnati's intention to put additional state resources toward school safety is an important step, and this hearing underscores the urgency of decisionmaking. The resolve we see on the part of school officials, law enforcement, and the community at large is encouraging. Well-intended and worthy suggestions are coming before us for consideration.

I have had some very informative and constructive discussions with educators, administrators, law enforcement officials, and parents in my area. When we listen, there are important lessons to be learned, often reflecting common sense and practicality.

Lesson #1 is that the best emergency plan in the world is no better than the worst, if people are not trained and drilled to carry it out under the extreme pressure of an emergency.

Lesson #2 is that with so many school buildings spread across our Commonwealth, and with so many individuals bearing responsibility for making schools safer, one plan or one approach is not going to fit all circumstances. Much of our effort may well be directed toward using what is already in place or available.

Many schools are already benefiting from the highly successful school resource officer program. Others have found positive results through bullying and violence prevention initiatives. Technological advances allow most schools to keep parents informed through direct communication via automated phone systems, websites, and mobile alerts.

Lesson #3 is that, after 9/11, we figured out that we could neither physically or financially guard every possible target or point of vulnerability against every contingency. As a nation, we determined how to stretch security to protect against the most likely threats. In the case of schools, the system is fragmented among many state agencies, so our focus must be directed toward coordination and communication to eliminate redundancies and ensure dollars are not being wasted.

Lesson #4 is that as we strive to make schools safer, there is an important cautionary note about the consequences of overreaction. One of the many deplorable aspects of the Kids for Cash scandal in Luzerne County was a zero tolerance policy made in the name of school safety.

Striking the appropriate balance is not easy. We must pay special attention to maintaining an environment for students, parents, staff and the community that is both welcoming and nurturing while also safe and secure.

Our efforts will continue long after the hearing adjourns. Our children deserve nothing less.