



# LUZERNE INTERMEDIATE UNIT

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## **School Safety Hearing Senate Education and Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees February 13, 2013**

Dear Senator Baker, Senator Folmer, Senator Scarnati and distinguished members of the Senate Committees,

My name is Joseph DeLucca and I serve as the Director of Federal, State & Nonpublic Programs for the Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18. I am also the President of the LIU/Luzerne County Safe Schools Committee. As a former teacher, counselor, coach, school administrator and most importantly, a father of three school aged children, I have developed an intense passion for school safety.

It is an honor for me to present testimony for you regarding current school safety issues and concerns. As the nucleus of all learning, school safety must capture the same amount of energy and attention as standardized testing. Research reveals that students must feel safe in school to achieve their maximum potential. With this in mind, I provide the following recommendations for improving school safety in Pennsylvania.

As school attacks continue to escalate (31 school shootings in the U.S. since Columbine in 1999, ABC News), districts are reacting with different means to achieve the same end – increased security cameras, metal detectors, armed guards, locks, doors, bullet proof windows, etc. Unfortunately, the money spent is many times wasted because we first do not attempt to identify the problems. Therefore, my first recommendation is to implement a more intensive school safety audit. In establishing a full scale audit system, school districts would conduct regular examinations of their buildings, grounds, policies & procedures. In addition, the new system would review more than just physical issues. More importantly, this close attention to detail would address the climate and culture of the school system along with management issues.

Through a train-the-trainer model, our IU has recently educated area schools on how to conduct their own safety audits. I am extremely proud of what we have been able to accomplish in a short period of time as a result of the diligence of our district teams. Committees from each district have identified numerous concerns within their own schools and are navigating change to resolve problems and increase safety.

Over the past decade, I have served in various capacities with different agencies to train educators, as well as local law enforcement on the latest best practices in school safety. Through these trainings, we have discovered a great disconnect across districts, schools, agencies and emergency management services. Many entities are finding it difficult to remain current with latest research and best practices. Consequently, when schools perform drills based on out dated information, we further endanger our teachers and children. For example, many questions arise in our trainings when we cover lockdown procedures: Do we cover the windows? Do we hide in the corner? Could we break a window? Could we evacuate if we can get out? Could we call 911? Do we still use codes? Although well- intentioned, many schools do not have accurate, up-to-date information on how to best respond in an emergency. Consequently, they do not practice the proper protocols and procedures, and if confronted with an actual situation, a crisis can quickly turn into a catastrophe.

Thus, to achieve a statewide level of safety aptitude, the second recommendation would be to create a state-wide Standard Response Protocol for schools to utilize common crisis plans, common language and common practices. Just as we have mandatory fire and disaster drills, the state must mandate drills that incorporate the Department of Homeland Security's recommendations to evacuate, hide out or take action in the event of a violent intruder.

My final recommendation supports Senator Scarnati's plan to place an armed/trained officer in every school in our commonwealth. Although this one measure has not stopped every school shooting, it has prevented more than we know. The presence of an armed guard alone can act as a deterrent. In events such as mass school shootings, every second counts. The main objective of security is to foil the intruders' plans, while the main goal of the perpetrator is to execute without interruption, and especially without resistance. Unfortunately, because many schools across our state have varied response times from local or state police depending on their location, the shooter would not be challenged until too many lives were lost. All schools already have some security in place, but without proper training and the means to protect, they are not able to fully defend their school community.

Although I have listed just a few suggestions, I realize that school safety encompasses many more components. Some other recommendations include:

- Empower teachers to make decisions without fear of liability
- Train teachers to deal with special needs students in the event of a crises
- Include alternative actions in crisis plans in the event primary plans fail
- Use common language and common sense
- Implement access control policies that limit entry for visitors and vendors
- Share floor plans with local law enforcement/911, not the general public
- Mandate security sweeps of buildings & grounds
- Support continual mental health awareness, education and treatment
- Develop and enforce policies that lead to stiff consequences for individuals who fail in their duty to protect children when they act with deliberate indifference or apathy

In closing, I would like to thank you for this tremendous opportunity and for taking the time to listen and influence the change necessary to protect our most precious resource: the safety and welfare of our children.