



## WALLENPAUPACK AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

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**Testimony of Michael R. Silsby, Superintendent of the Wallenpaupack Area School District  
To the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee and the Senate  
Education Committee  
February 13, 2013**

On behalf of the Wallenpaupack Area School District, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today concerning school safety and security. I am Michael Silsby, Superintendent of the Wallenpaupack Area School District. Our school district is located in Northeastern Pennsylvania and has a student population of 3,400 students. We are a rural school district that encompasses 320 square miles. I have been employed as the Superintendent of Schools for 12 years and have served the district in various capacities for the past 34 years.

Schools are still one of the safest places for our youth. Four major events throughout the past years have helped to shape the safety planning in our schools. The tragedies at Columbine High School, New York City on September 11<sup>th</sup>, Virginia Tech University and Newtown prompted all schools to review and update their security measures and crisis response procedures. After each of these events I was asked by many parents if I could ensure the safety of their children at school. Unfortunately, I could not give them the guarantee they wanted. But, what I did pledge to them is that we would continually strive to put in place measures that would make school a safe place.

School districts are in the middle of a balancing act when it comes to security. They need to create a welcoming, supportive, open environment for students, parents and community members, while at the same time being mindful of the types of preventative measures necessary to enhance

security. That is a fine line to walk and there is a degree of practicality involved. Especially in light of shrinking budgets and increasing demands on resources. We must also be mindful that school safety and security is not limited to intruders and mass shootings. There are many everyday crises that schools must plan for including but not limited to medical emergencies, drug and alcohol abuse, natural disasters, bullying, domestic disputes, child abuse, conflict management, dating violence, concussion management, disruptive behavior, online safety, youth suicide, harassment, managing the aftermath of a tragedy and transportation safety. Within the past week Northeastern Pennsylvania schools had a brawl during a basketball game, a local college was closed because of an online threat, an attempted abduction of a student occurred, a threat on twitter forced the evacuation and cancellation of a basketball game and parents were alerted that a suspicious person was spotted near a school. What this illustrates is that the mission of a school to provide a safe, secure and healthy environment has expanded greatly.

Our school district takes proactive measures to protect the safety of all our students and staff. District representatives collaborate with local emergency planning committees and emergency management teams. Our plans are made in concert with all of our local first responders and are based on the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office of Safe School Initiatives. Plans are regularly reviewed and updated. Procedures are in place to respond to critical incidents. I have included a copy of a safety and security update that we recently gave to our Board of Education.

The basis of our planning includes the four phases of an emergency: prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. Students, staff, law enforcement, first responders and emergency management representatives have participated in a number of drills and simulations and will continue to do so moving forward.

Each year as the district evaluates our preparedness and conducts a risk assessment. There are five areas of focus:

- Facilities – this would include making structural changes in our buildings and introducing or expanding monitoring technologies.
- Training – continued implementation of drills at the individual school, district and regional levels.
- Staffing – are we in need of additional staff or do we repurpose existing staff?
- Mental Health Services – review the issues regarding our students affective needs and providing programming to address their behavioral health.
- Resources – budgetary development to allocate district funds to our priority initiatives.

How can you help schools?

- Continue to support the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s Office for Safe Schools development of model school emergency response plans, policies, training opportunities and resources.
- Provide funding for school facility improvements.
- The Departments of Education and Health need to jointly address the issues surrounding the ongoing mental health needs of our students.
- Provide funding for school resource officers.
- Provide funding for training opportunities.

Our district does not currently employ school resource officers. After the Newtown incident our administration, staff, school board and community have begun a dialogue regarding the hiring of

officers. I believe that we are working towards this end. Targeted funding to schools to either implement or expand their school resource officer program would be helpful.

The mental health stability of our students is of grave concern. Schools are a microcosm of society. What is outside 24/7 is in our hallways nine months of the year. Unfortunately, many of the shooting events have been carried out by individuals with emotional issues. Schools are seeing an increase in the number of students with mental health needs. I would like to share a few statistics that illustrate the point. Our student assistance teams have a caseload of 353 students. This year 55 students have spent a portion of the school year in a residential treatment center for behavioral services. A total of 485 students district wide are under psychiatric care and are receiving medication for a multitude of conditions. In collaboration with mental health agencies 34 students are assigned a one on one therapeutic support staff member (TSS). At a time when mental health needs are increasing funding is decreasing. Psychiatric access in our rural area is a grave concern. Families experience lengthy wait times to have initial evaluations completed. The focus on these services during the budgetary process should be a high priority.

In closing I thank you for your commitment to all the constituents of Pennsylvania. I am especially grateful that you are looking to assist schools in providing a safe secure place for our young people.