



Testimony on School Safety Hearing on Improving Student and School Safety March 2, 2018

Senator Eichelberger, Senator Dinniman, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you in regard to school safety. I am Mark DiRocco, the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, which represents over 840 superintendents, assistant superintendents, and school leaders across the state.

In 2016 I left public education after a 38-year career, with my final 14 years serving as a school superintendent. I have a deep connection to the topic of school safety and can personally speak to the many efforts that school superintendents undertake in an effort to keep their students and staff safe. It is a burden that weighs heavily on all school leaders and a responsibility that they take very seriously.

After the terrible attacks that have occurred in our nation's schools dating back to Columbine, Colorado in 1999 to the most recent events in Parkland, Florida, the same questions continue to be asked:

- How did this happen here?
- What behavioral signs did we miss that led to this violent act?
- Do we need more security in our schools?
- Do we need more mental health and counseling services in our schools?
- Do we have effective bullying and harassment prevention programs in place?
- Do we need more social work with unstable families?
- Is the access to firearms too easy for would-be attackers?
- Has the dark side of media and, in recent years, social media created more violent behavior in our children and young adults?

It seems that many of these questions are asked after each tragedy, but we rarely sustain the conversation long enough to solve the problem because it is so complex and multi-faceted. I do not come before you today with a solution to this scourge, but I offer the following thoughts and suggestions based on my experience as a superintendent, secondary school principal, and the information I have reviewed from reports on school shootings.

According to studies by the U.S. Secret Service, FBI, and the U.S. Department of Education, school shootings and violent attacks are not random or impulsive acts. They are planned events. The perpetrators do not threaten their targets directly before the attack and they almost always tell someone else or indicate their intent prior to the attack.

There is not one profile of the type of person that commits these acts, although the vast majority of attackers are male. Almost every perpetrator has been referred to as a loner, disconnected to school population or community, has suffered a significant loss, and viewed school and/or home as a place of pain or discomfort. Many of them had been bullied or mistreated in some fashion at home, school, or on social media. Sometimes, they had previous incidents of serious anger and behavioral issues. Often, the perpetrators believed that no one was helping them.

Once the attackers have reached the point where they are committed to do harm, they develop a plan. When the plan is in place, their next step is to find access to weapons. Once the weapons are secured, the event is scheduled and the clock is ticking. This pathway to violence has occurred in almost every school shooting. The most important and difficult task for school, law enforcement, medical, and mental health professionals is to intervene in this pathway to violence before the perpetrator takes action.

Most school attacks can be prevented if we are able to intercede while the attacker is developing the violence plan. In fact, many acts of violence have been stopped because someone made a report and the matter was investigated in a timely manner. Although the perpetrators will usually indicate they have a plan, the information may be fragmented and the signs can be easily missed. We have to be observant of behaviors and statements made by individuals that could be indicators of violence. The key is to be constantly vigilant, take every report seriously, and act quickly.

We have to ensure that all our students have a sense of belonging in our schools and communities. Every child needs to be connected to a caring adult who can identify when they are in need or experiencing personal difficulties that may be escalating out of control. Most school districts have done an excellent job of tightening their security, implementing bullying and harassment prevention programs, providing referrals to parents, and training their staff and students for a variety of emergency situations. Unfortunately, these events continue to happen.

No matter what is decided in terms of actions to improve safety, school districts must have the flexibility, resources and funding necessary for the sole purpose of school security. We need to have a sustained conversation with all our community stakeholders and leaders to create a multi-layered approach to this issue and take deliberate action to prevent any more tragedies in the future.