

**Testimony of Michael R. Silsby, Superintendent of the Wallenpaupack Area School District
to the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee**

June 15, 2017

On behalf of the Wallenpaupack Area School District, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the After Action Assessment of the Eric Frein Manhunt. I have been employed as the Superintendent of Schools for 16 years and have served the District in various capacities for the past 38 years. The Wallenpaupack Area School District attendance area includes the Pennsylvania State Police Blooming Grove barracks. The School District services students from both Pike and Wayne Counties. The incident certainly had an impact on the entire region but, I will focus specifically on the issues faced by our School District students, staff and parents.

On February 13, 2013, I had the opportunity to travel to Harrisburg and testify before this Committee regarding school safety and security planning. Many of the testifiers that day talked about dealing with the unexpected circumstances that we may face in the operation of our School Districts. As a Superintendent responsible for not only the education of our students, but also the safety and security of these same students and staff, I am glad that advanced planning and procedures for situations like this were in place. There were many lessons learned from the sharing of ideas at that hearing in 2013. Advance preparation proved beneficial during this incident management.

Once I became aware of the shooting at the barracks, we began to implement safeguards to protect our students. The fact that the person responsible for this tragic act was not in custody resulted in heightened concerns regarding the safety of our students. Meetings were held and it was decided to open school on Monday, September 15th. School staff were briefed and all normal safety and security measures were in place. In addition, we kept all students indoors as a

precaution. After school activities were limited as well. Each of our school buildings have a full time School Resource Officer employed by the District. This was the second year of the program and provided an added sense of security for our buildings. We reached out to the Sheriff's offices in both counties and Hawley Borough Police to provide roving patrols throughout the day to enhance our security at each of our school buildings. As you can imagine there was much apprehension and concern by all stakeholders since the location of the shooter still was unknown. When the vehicle was found and it was determined that this was most likely utilized in the incident, the level of concern was raised by the fact that it's location was approximately 2 miles from our campus. Because of this new development the decision was made to close school on Wednesday, September 17th. All families were notified through our emergency call system and web page posting. A transcript of that notification is attached as Exhibit A. After daily consultation with law enforcement the District was subsequently closed on September 18th and 19th as well. School reopened on Monday, September 22nd and all families were once again notified through our communication system and the website. Information for parents on how to deal with issues their children may be facing was also posted to the website. The transcript of the message is attached as Exhibit B. During the week of September 22 – 26 parent levels of anxiety were high. We allowed parents to keep their children at home if they chose to do so. Home athletic events were rescheduled to other venues and practices were monitored by security personnel. When teams arrived back to campus late in the evening we had security personnel meet the returning athletes and coaches. During this time frame attendance levels returned to normal. A letter on September 29th was sent home encouraging all students to return to school. A copy is attached as Exhibit C.

As a result of the three days of closure I requested a waiver of student attendance for 3 days. This request is attached as Exhibit D. The waiver was approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education in a letter dated March 9, 2015. This approval is attached as Exhibit E. Ultimately the District only used one day of the waiver as a school calendar adjustment. The only financial implications to the District was compensation for the Hawley Borough Police to provide additional security services. The amount was \$9,275.00.

Our thanks goes out to the Sheriff's Departments, Hawley Borough Police and the Pennsylvania State Police for providing services to our District. Captain Christopher Paris and Captain Mark Lavelle were in constant contact with District Officials and kept us up to date with the ongoing search. Their willingness to keep us informed was most appreciated and extremely helpful as I made decisions daily based on the current circumstances. Once Eric Frein was taken into custody all returned to normal. As always, we will remain vigilant in providing a safe and secure environment for our children.

In summary, the impact to our School District was:

- Financial \$9,275.00
- Disruption of school schedule
- Psychological and emotional strain on students, staff and family members

I thank you for your commitment to all the constituents of Pennsylvania. I am especially grateful that you are continually looking to assist schools in the areas of safety and security as it pertains to educating our young people.

I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.



WALLENPAUPACK AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Assistant Superintendent
Joann Hudak, Ed.D.
Assistant Superintendent

Michael R. Silsby
Superintendent

Kerriann Horan
Business Manager
Jennie Hildebrand
Board Secretary

The Wallenpaupack Area Administration has maintained daily communications with law enforcement and other officials since the shooting at the Blooming Grove Barracks last Friday. Based on that information the district decided to take precautionary measures and close school today. We will continue to monitor the situation on a daily basis in our decision making process. In the event that school is closed, parents, students, and staff will be notified via district website, local media and our emergency phone notification system in the morning. Please note that when school is closed, all activities, athletic and community events are cancelled.

The Wallenpaupack Area School District is dedicated to providing a safe environment for our students and staff. We appreciate your understanding and cooperation during this difficult time.

Michael Silsby
Superintendent



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The Wallenpaupack Area School District will be open on Monday, September 22nd. We are in unprecedented times for our area. It is the District's goal to provide a safe and secure environment for our students and staff at school. All of our daily safety and security measures will be in place, including the presence of our School Resource Officers. Additional security measures will also be taken. This will include additional security personnel. All local and state law enforcement will be notified that school will be in session.

As a precaution, all students will remain indoors throughout the school day. Limited afterschool activities will be supervised by security personnel.

This is an extremely difficult situation for our community. School will be in session but, ultimately it is your decision as parents whether to send your children to school. The District will respect your decision and all absences will be excused.

I will continue to monitor the situation on a day-to-day basis. Any change in schedule will be communicated to you through the call system and local media.

Thank you for your continued cooperation. Additional information and this statement can be viewed on our website - <http://www.wallenpaupack.org>.

Michael Silsby
Superintendent



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September 29, 2014

Dear Parents/Guardians,

On behalf of the Wallenpaupack Area School District administration and staff, I thank you for your support and continued cooperation throughout this difficult situation.

After consultation with law enforcement officials we will resume all regular activities on Wednesday, October 1, 2014. Student attendance has reached normal levels and we encourage the return to school for all students. If you have a unique situation please feel free to contact your building principal.

We will maintain extra security during the school day and have extended coverage for after school activities. Our thanks go out to the Sheriffs' Departments, Hawley Boro Police and the PA State Police for providing services to our school district.

This has been an unsettling time period for the entire region. Until the individual responsible for this tragedy is apprehended I will continue to monitor the facts on a daily basis in concert with law enforcement. Decisions as to the operation of school and school functions will continue to be made on a day to day basis.

Resources for discussing these events with your children can be found at:

http://www.wallenpaupack.org/ep_resources.asp

As always we will remain vigilant in providing the best and safest experiences possible for your children.

Thanks Again,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael R. Silsby".

Michael R. Silsby
Superintendent



EXHIBIT D

2552 Route 6
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October 20, 2014

Mr. Stephen Fisher
School Services Unit
Pennsylvania Department of Education
333 Market St
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

Dear Mr. Fisher:

On behalf of the Wallenpaupack Area School District I am requesting a Section 2523 Waiver for the 2014-2015 school year attendance requirements. This request is for school closures on September 17, 2014, September 18, 2014 and September 19, 2014. All schools in the district were closed on these dates. The reason for the school closures was the man hunt for Eric Frein who is believed to be responsible for the shooting of the two Pennsylvania State Troopers from the Blooming Grove Barracks. This shooting occurred in our school district and the suspect's vehicle was found abandoned approximately 2 miles from our school campus. The increased police presence and the uncertainty of the suspect's location resulted in the aforementioned school closures for safety reasons.

Enclosed is a copy of the school calendar for the 2014-2015 school year. As per our telephone discussion I would like to address the school calendar with our Board of Education at the November 10, 2014 meeting.

If you require additional information or would like to discuss this request, please contact me at 570-251-3009 or silsby@wallenpaupack.org. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Silsby
Superintendent

MRS/jh



March 9, 2015

Michael R. Silsby
Superintendent
Wallenpaupack Area School District
2552 Route 6
Hawley, PA 18428-7045

Sent Via Electronic Mail

Dear Mr. Silsby:

I am responding to your request for an exception to the 180 day attendance requirement for all students attending the Wallenpaupack Area School District. You indicate that all schools were closed due to the manhunt for Eric Frein. Classes were cancelled on September 17, 18, and 19, 2014.

Your request for a waiver was reviewed pursuant to the authority of the Pennsylvania School Code, Section 2523, and the procedures identified in the Basic Education Circular titled Emergency School Closings, 24 P.S. 2523 (Revised October, 2010). In view of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding this emergency situation, your waiver request is approved.

The approval is granted under the authority of the Pennsylvania School Code, Section 2523, and the procedures identified in the Basic Education Circular titled Emergency School Closings, 24 P.S. 2523. Please be advised that the approval of this waiver does not release the school district of the responsibility to provide a minimum of 990 hours of instruction for secondary students and 900 hours of instruction for elementary students (including full-day kindergarten students). With this approval there will be no loss of state subsidy related to instructional days.

Students attending the Wallenpaupack Area School District that were not in attendance due to the closings on September 17, 18, and 19, 2014, will be counted in the Wallenpaupack Area School District's student membership for those days. With this approval there will be no loss of state subsidy related to instructional days.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen Fisher". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "S" and "F".

Stephen Fisher, Director
School Services Office

c: Madeline Rogers, Division of Subsidy Data and Administration