

Testimony of
Auditor General Eugene DePasquale
Wednesday, March 13, 2013
Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness and Education Committees
Regarding
School Safety and Emergency Planning

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to discuss the role of the Department of Auditor General in assessing the safety of Pennsylvania public schools.

I commend the Senate for holding hearings on this issue. Unfortunately, there are times when tragedy – such as what happened in December at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut – prompts us to take a closer look at our own backyard and to do everything in our power to prevent such a horrible incident from happening here in Pennsylvania. It is better that we ask the “what if” questions now and work together to develop a comprehensive plan of prevention.

The Department of Auditor General is pleased to be an integral part of the effort to protect our children and the schools they attend. We join with the Department of Education and the Pennsylvania State Police in continuing to seek ways to improve school security. While each of our agencies have different roles, we share a common goal of ensuring that our schools are safe places where students can concentrate on learning and teachers can focus on teaching.

The Department of Education requires schools to collect, and report annually, data on school related incidents of violence.

The Pennsylvania State Police conduct physical security risk and vulnerability assessments free of charge for school districts, upon request. The State Police's review provides an in-depth analysis of a district's physical threats, including aerial photographs, etc. Due to the detailed nature of its review, the State Police limits the review to only one school building within a district. It is then the district's responsibility to apply the findings and recommendations to the other school buildings within a district. Additionally, the State Police's review is limited because it has only one or two officers dedicated to conducting the school risk assessments; the result is a long waiting list for schools.

The Department of Auditor General is part of the safety equation because we conduct a safety review as part of our routine school audit. Our safety reviews cover basic physical elements — such as locked doors and windows and controlled points of entry and egress — as well as a review of other items ranging from the district's emergency plan, emergency responder involvement, bullying policies, visitation policies, and appropriate Internet filters.

Through January of this year, auditors conducted 570 initial safe school reviews, including basic on-site security reviews of more than 1,000 school buildings across Pennsylvania. Additionally, nearly 400 follow-up school safety reviews were conducted.

There are three major areas of concern that were consistently identified for needing improvement during our initial school safety audits: planning, training and physical security. Among the most common findings are incomplete, underdeveloped and untested crisis plans or emergency response procedures. Examples include the lack of communication with parents about relevant emergency procedures; and failure to dictate clearly defined roles and duties during an emergency, including a media spokesperson.

We also frequently found a lack of annual training for all school staff — including cafeteria staff, custodial staff, and bus drivers — regarding their role in supporting the crisis plan and emergency procedures. Specifically, we often found failure to conduct table-top exercises or practice drills with first-responders to test implementation of emergency plans and procedures.

In the area of physical security of schools, we have encountered exterior doors not labeled on the outside to assist emergency responders, and unlocked unassigned lockers, storage areas, cafeterias, gyms, auditoriums and vocational shops. In addition, our auditors have reported the lack of a communication system between a school's main office and outside classes such as physical education and band, and a lack of exterior door alarms.

Our auditors take school safety very seriously, so we don't just audit and run. We conduct follow-up safe school reviews to determine what action, if any, is taken by the district. Follow-ups also include a review of any newly implemented safety measures. And, for the most part, the schools have implemented our recommendations. Our audits are making a difference.

For example, new bullying procedures were added as part of follow-up reviews due to new bullying laws. Because of our audits, a large number of districts received, or requested, the full risk and vulnerability assessment from the Pennsylvania State Police. Our audits also resulted in buildings with multiple entrances and exits receiving improved controls such as staff presence and/or security cameras, and schools have designated entrances for specific individuals such as bus riders, car riders, staff, or visitors. And, school visitation protocols were revised to include sign-in/sign-out logs, identification of unfamiliar visitors, and use of visitor badges. Crisis plans and emergency procedures were updated and schools obtained and updated agreements with local law enforcement officials.

While we are pleased that our audits resulted in school security improvements, we are constantly looking for ways to improve the process and help provide even greater safety for school students, teachers and staff.

The Department of Auditor General tracks new school safety laws and regulations that may impact our audit work. In fact, we will update our safe schools procedures this spring to add elements now required by law and to incorporate new areas of best practice. For example, we

will further evaluate issues of school safety climate and bullying to determine whether the school has developed some mechanism for addressing these issues. We also will examine background checks and child abuse clearances for staff members other than the bus drivers' we currently review. We also will review the data that the districts provide to the Department of Education regarding violent incidents to determine whether their reporting process is sound.

We continue to monitor new school safety developments and best practices in Pennsylvania and nationally to keep our reviews and recommendations current and relevant.

As a father, the safety of our schools and our children, teachers and staff is very personal to me. I welcome the opportunity to work with the committees and the Department of Education and the Pennsylvania State Police to continue to update our review process to improve the safety of all Pennsylvania schools.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer your questions.

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