



To: Senate Education & Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency
Preparedness Committees
From: Deborah Gordon Klehr, Staff Attorney, Education Law Center
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Re: **SB 10**

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The Education Law Center is a non-profit legal advocacy and educational organization dedicated to ensuring that all of Pennsylvania's children have access to a quality public education. The Education Law Center mourns the tragedy that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School. We must continue to build safe, positive environments in our schools.

Our work on school climate focuses on engaging the whole school community—teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members—in the creation of safe, positive environments. To that end, we are writing to express our concerns with **SB 10**. We have three main concerns:

1. Districts should decide what programs are best to address school violence in their own district. The proposed language financially favors funding for school security officers at the expense of effective prevention programs, and therefore ties the hands of school districts in determining which is the best security strategy for their community.
2. Moreover, evidence shows that an expanded SRO presence in schools will not have the intended effect of improving school climate.
3. Given the state's limited resources, the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office of Safe Schools should be funding *public schools*, not municipal police officers to be assigned to non-public schools.

We support your effort to address the issue of school violence and improve school safety. But we believe that the existent language in 24 PS §13-1302-A(c) is sufficient to allow school districts to choose the most appropriate violence prevention initiatives. We also support the allocation of \$10,000,000 in targeted grants to school entities to fund programs which improve school climate in accordance with the enumerated programs in 1302-A(c). We specifically note that the current language of 1302-A(c) includes prevention programs such as school-wide positive behavior support, conflict resolution, school-based diversion programs,

as well as the “establishment or enhancement of school security personnel, including school resource officers.” 24 PS §1302-A(c)(11). The current language in (c) already authorizes the Office of Safe Schools to make targeted grants to school entities to fund programs to enhance school security, but it also focuses on prevention programs – which of course enhance school security as well.

The requirement in proposed §13-1302-A(e) to appropriate 75 percent of the funds to school entities or municipalities focused on school resource officers, while appropriating only 25 percent of the funds to school entities focused on programs which address school violence, including prevention programs *and* school resource officers, unnecessarily restricts local districts in determining what course is best for them. We believe that funding should be prioritized “to school entities with the greatest need to establish safety and order,” §1302-A(d)(2)(ii), but that the school entities should be able to use the funds for whatever they believe to be appropriate, without a funding allocation cap imposed by proposed language in 1302-A(e).

Some of the examples of what can be funded under §1302-A(c) are programs that are evidence-based, data-driven, and focused on reducing violence by identifying student risk factors and preventing violence. School Resource Officers may play a role in reacting to violent behavior, but there are a plethora of worthwhile programs aimed at preventing the violent behavior from occurring in the first place. We support an increase in funding to implement prevention programs in schools and believe that school entities know best what programs they need to create positive, safe school environments.

It’s important to note that although many of the prevention programs listed in §1302-A(c) are evidence-based and proven to prevent violent or disruptive behavior from occurring in the first place, little evidence exists to support the notion that an increased SRO presence improves school climate. Even when controlling for poverty, schools with an SRO have nearly five times the rate of arrests for disorderly conduct as schools without an SRO. And there is abundant evidence showing a correlation between arrests and dropout: Arrest doubles the probability of dropout even when controlling for arrest expectations, college expectations and concurrent delinquency, grade retention, school suspension, middle school grade point average, and a number of demographic factors. SROs tend to get involved in school disciplinary matters and conflicts that are not criminal in nature. We can make schools safer and improve school climate without unnecessarily criminalizing our students. We should encourage districts to adopt proven practices for reducing school violence, such as many of the options listed in §13-1302-A(c).

In addition, given that the language that already exists in 13-1302-A(c) allows for grants to fund SRO’s, the main difference is that SB 10 funds municipalities, which can hire and assign SROs to *non-public schools*. Given the state’s limited resources, the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s Office of Safe Schools should be funding public schools, not private ones.

Finally, we urge the PDE to coordinate with members of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, as they have expertise in prevention initiatives and the research around risk factors and how to prevent school violence. Resources should be utilized efficiently and coordinated across state agencies.

We appreciate your attention to this important matter of school climate. Please contact me with any additional questions. I can be reached at (215) 346-6920 or dklehr@elc-pa.org. Thank you.