



**TESTIMONY OF THE**

**PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

**BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**OCTOBER 10, 2024**

**ON SCHOOL SAFETY AND SECURITY**

Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to provide written testimony on the critically important topic of school safety and security.

Students cannot learn in an environment that is not safe and secure. Teachers cannot teach in an environment that is not safe and secure. Parents should know that when they send their student to school that their student is safe. That is why school leaders and school boards around the state continue to make school safety and security a high priority.

School safety and security presents a number of challenges for school leaders. We want to highlight some of the biggest and then explain how PSBA is assisting these leaders in ensuring quality safety and security measures are occurring across the Commonwealth.

*First is the surge in student mental health needs since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.* Although student mental health issues were beginning to rise before the pandemic, those needs have drastically increased since. Addressing the mental health needs of students that impact their ability to learn was rated as the biggest instructional challenge facing school leaders in the 2024 *State of Education* Report. But mental health issues not only impact students' ability to learn, but also present challenges related to student behavior and discipline. Changes in student behaviors with ties to mental health include increases in incidents related to bullying/cyberbullying and controlled substances (including nicotine/vaping).

*Second, and somewhat connected to mental health, are issues related to social media.* Especially in the last few years, school leaders have been forced to cancel school, contact law enforcement, and make other changes to their educational programs due to social media. Even though many of the social media threats that schools receive are investigated and determined to not be credible, schools cannot take them lightly. School leaders are forced to treat every threat as serious until proven otherwise. This means schools are shut down and learning is not occurring during these times. While social media has frequently been a source of school threats, it has also been a source of information for schools to thwart threats or other security incidents that happen in or at schools. The inability to escape the seemingly 24/7 onslaught of student devices has fed into a circle of on-going mental health needs in our schools.

*Third are school facilities issues.* A basic part of school safety and security is the physical school building where students and staff attend and work. However, nearly three-quarters (71.4%) of superintendents stated that one or more of their school district's buildings were in need of major repair or replacement in the 2023 *State of Education* report. Health and safety upgrades were a commonly cited reason for school buildings to be considered in need of repair or renovation.

*Fourth are school staffing issues.* The focus on school safety and security has led to a number of new mandates, especially related to training and reporting, as well as the need for increased staffing related to safety and security. For example, Act 44 of 2018 created the Safe2Say Something program which requires school leaders and staff to respond to reports from the Safe2Say Something tipline. As valuable as the program is and has been, it was not paired with additional resources needed to fulfill the obligations required under the law. Also, the recently enacted Act 55 of 2024 now requires all school entities to employ at least one school security personnel who is trained according to the requirements of law.

All of these challenges impact the interactions the school district has with students, staff and the community. These challenges, mainly the on-going mandates, limit the flexibility of school leaders to allocate resources where they could see the biggest impact. PSBA and its members are extremely grateful for the contributions from the state government to address school safety and security as well as student mental health needs in the last several years. Without these vital investments, our public schools would not be as safe as they are now. Despite these investments, school districts are often forced to rely on local taxpayers to fund school safety and security improvements. While this does help maintain local control, there is more the state could do.

Throughout PSBA's 129-year history we have stepped in to fill the voids and provide resources to accomplish goals of the time, school safety and security is no different. The Pennsylvania School Safety Institute (PennSSI) offers a range of options to support schools, which include classroom instruction in addressing safety and security incidents, school-based immersive scenarios to navigate in collaboration with law enforcement partners, bi-annual Safety Summits to hear from experts and the Stop the Prop campaign which has issued over 130,000 complimentary stickers to public schools to improve the local practices of keeping doors locked. PSBA also offers 24-hour crisis and time-sensitive communications support to help districts navigate communications in challenging times. PennSSI has also partnered with Millersville University to offer a Certificate in School Safety Preparedness.

PSBA's recommended policy guides related to threat assessment and response are based on state laws and regulations and guidance from the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency and the Safe2Say Something Program. Schools have specific requirements outlined in law for establishing threat assessment teams, working with law enforcement agencies, and developing procedures and teams to respond to reports made through the Safe2Say Something program.

School teams coordinate with law enforcement agencies based on laws and regulations and the memorandum of understanding that each school district has with their local law enforcement agencies. They work together to respond to reports submitted through the Safe2Say Something program as well as to address other reported threats and areas of concern on a case-by-case basis.

The state's School Safety and Security Committee, which is a part of the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency, oversees grant funding, training requirements and provides guidance and resources on many aspects of school safety and security. The School Safety and Security Committee has been a valuable resource in helping schools address continuing and emerging threats to school safety and security.

Every school district is unique in their safety personnel, law enforcement coverage, facilities and other safety related considerations. Therefore, PSBA urges the General Assembly to continue to review evidence-based practices and issue new laws or guidance based off of what we learn so that school personnel are prepared for the myriad of safety and security challenges they face. However, we ask that laws, regulations and policies related to school safety and security strike the difficult balance of state oversight and funding with local control to properly allocate resources.