



**House Education Committee**  
**Public Hearing on School Safety and Security**  
Thursday, October 10, 2024

**Testimony of Michael Pennington, Executive Director**  
**Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD)**

My name is Michael Pennington, and I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). Thank you for the opportunity to share the work being done at PCCD and throughout the Commonwealth to foster safe, secure learning environments in our schools.

As Pennsylvania's justice planning and policymaking agency, PCCD oversees a wide range of programs and initiatives designed to increase the safety of Pennsylvania's communities. For more than six years, PCCD has housed Pennsylvania's School Safety and Security Committee (SSSC), which was created by Act 44 of 2018 to oversee school safety related initiatives and grant funding for the Commonwealth. As school safety is a multi-faceted, multidisciplinary issue, the SSSC is made up of appointed representatives from the various state agencies that play a role in addressing school mental health and physical security needs – including PCCD, the Attorney General's Office, the Departments of Education (PDE) and Human Services (DHS), the State Police (PSP), and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) – as well as local stakeholders representing school administration, security professionals, and others.

Since its inception, the SSSC and PCCD have been tasked by state law<sup>1</sup> with a significant and evolving set of school safety-related deliverables, including the following:

- Issuing over \$600 million in school safety grant funding to support both physical security enhancements and behavioral health improvements in both public and nonpublic schools throughout Pennsylvania.
- Creating physical security assessment criteria standards that schools can use to assess security strengths and vulnerabilities of their facilities and make recommendations for improvements.
- Developing behavioral health assessment criteria standards that schools can use to evaluate their current mental and behavioral health services, policies, and trainings and to inform schools on any gaps in their needs.
- Establishing an assessor registry, which schools can refer to for an expert to conduct assessments that meet the Committee's standards.

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<sup>1</sup> PA Public School Code, Article XIII-B (School Safety and Security), Article XIII-C (School Security), Article XIII-E (Threat Assessment).

- Establishing an approved security vendor list, which schools can utilize for school security personnel that meets PA School Code training requirements under Article XIII-C.
- Developing National Association of School Resource Officer (NASRO) training equivalent standards as well as evaluating and approving alternative training opportunities for school security personnel.
- Creating model procedures and guidelines as well as training and informational materials for schools on threat assessment teams and threat assessments, generally, as required under Article XIII-E of the PA Public School Code.
- Developing a model trauma-informed approaches to education plan for schools.
- As required by Act 55 of 2022, developing and offering free annual training options to over 250,000 public school employees on situational awareness, trauma-informed approaches, behavioral health awareness, suicide and bullying awareness, substance use awareness, and emergency training drills and behavioral threats.
- Developing and implementing free, mandated annual training that all school safety and security coordinators must take to serve in that role.
- Conducting regular, confidential surveys of school entities and collecting information from school safety coordinators about the status of their school safety needs to help inform the work of the SSSC.

Most recently, Act 33 of 2023 established an Executive Committee within the SSSC, responsible for reviewing current and emerging school safety issues, including data from the Safe2Say Something program, collaborative county-level school safety efforts, bystander reporting, crisis intervention, emergency preparedness, and strategies for preventing threats in schools. The Executive Committee meets every two months and is comprised of representatives from the Office of Attorney General, PDE, PSP, PEMA, and the legislature.

More information about all of these programs can be found on PCCD's [School Safety and Security webpage](#).

### **Advancing Evidence-Based School Violence Prevention Programs**

Like many state-level school safety centers, PCCD's School Safety and Security Committee was formed in response to a high-profile school tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Since its beginnings, much of the Committee's efforts have focused on identifying and advancing evidence-based practices that can prevent school-based violence through an organized, centralized approach.

Decades of research on behavioral threat assessment and management have shown that early detection and intervention are critical for identifying at-risk individuals, preventing violence in schools, and protecting students and staff. Threat assessment is a multidisciplinary, fact-based process used to assess and intervene with individuals whose behaviors indicate a threat to themselves, others, facilities, and the broader community. Research shows that systematic

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph McKenna et al., [States' School Safety Centers: A Brief Look Into History, Characteristics, and Activities](#), WestEd Justice & Prevention Center, 2021.

approaches to gather, respond to, and document threat information through the threat assessment process can effectively reduce violence.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 2021-22 school year, all public-school entities in Pennsylvania have been required to establish at least one threat assessment team and adopt related policies, procedures, and practices. PCCD has developed extensive resources to support the ongoing implementation of school-based threat assessment initiatives, including the [PCCD Threat Assessment Model Procedures and Guidelines \(2nd Edition, 2022\)](#), as well as guidance and communication templates for school entities. PCCD is currently working to release a 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the model procedures and guidelines based on gaps identified through an end-of-school-year survey that was conducted earlier this year.

Since 2021, PCCD has supported Pennsylvania’s first statewide K-12 Threat Assessment Team Training and Technical Assistance Network, launched through a federal grant to RSM Corporation. So far, nearly 4,300 school Threat Assessment Team members and professionals have been trained. RSM has conducted 35 free, full-day training sessions in-person for 1,220 attendees, and 20 advanced scenario-based sessions for 543 participants. These half-day sessions utilize case studies relevant to areas of concern raised by the school entity requesting supports and are more advanced than the full-day foundational course. RSM also developed additional standalone training modules on topics like violence risk factors and conducting threat assessments.

A U.S. Secret Service analysis of 67 averted plots of targeted school violence found that 92% were discovered and stopped because the plotter either communicated their intent, behaved unusually, or both, and someone reported it to authorities.<sup>4</sup> In two-thirds of targeted school violence cases, warning signs went unreported by bystanders.<sup>5</sup>

Effective bystander reporting programs, with clear reporting methods and intervention processes, are critical to the threat assessment process and can prevent targeted violence.<sup>6</sup> Pennsylvania has one such program – the Safe2Say Something program established by Act 44 of 2018 – which is an anonymous 24/7 tip-line run by the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General. Since January 2019, it has received more than 146,513 tips from students and other active bystanders sharing information about potential concerns, including 32,873 during the 2023-24 school year.<sup>7</sup>

Bullying and cyberbullying were the most reported issues to Safe2Say, up 25% from the previous year. Alarming, reports of “Threat Against Person” increased by 64%, with over 1,300 reports. The tip-line also helped recover 35 weapons and received more than 1,100 reports of “Threat Against Schools” during the same period.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [National Institute of Justice. School Safety: Research on Gathering Tips and Addressing Threats.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools | United States Secret Service](#)

<sup>5</sup> [U.S. Secret Service. Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Secret Service. Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Safe2Say Something Annual Report: 2023-2024 School Year, Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General.](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Safe2Say Something Annual Report: 2023-2024 School Year, Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General.](#)

## **Expanding Access to Trained School Security Personnel**

In addition to robust threat assessment and bystander reporting systems, schools also rely on trained security personnel to increase safety. School security personnel include school resource officers (SROs), school police officers (SPOs), and school security guards. SPOs are law enforcement officers hired by schools or third-party vendors, appointed by a county judge, and designated by the school entity's board or administration.<sup>9</sup> SROs are law enforcement officers commissioned and employed by a law enforcement agency assigned to schools through an agreement between both entities.<sup>10</sup> School security guards, employed by a school or third-party vendors, provide security services but lack police powers.<sup>11</sup>

School security personnel serve as both crime prevention officers who can help shape school entity policy and practice<sup>12</sup> and, when trained to address the unique needs of youth and the specific dynamics of a school setting, can also play a key role as mentors for students.<sup>13</sup> To ensure that officers are appropriately prepared and equipped to meet these demands, all school security personnel in Pennsylvania must complete the Basic School Resource Officer (SRO) Course offered by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) or an approved equivalent course in accordance with Act 67 of 2019. PCCD also maintains a list of approved third-party vendors for school security guard services. Additionally, starting in the 2024-25 school year, Act 55 of 2024 required school districts to have at least one full-time security personnel per district, on duty, during the school day. PCCD is currently developing guidance and a website for the new requirement, which will be released in the next few weeks.

## **Establishing Standards for School Safety & Mental Health in Pennsylvania**

Since FY22-23, the PA School Code has required that school safety grant funding should first be used for activities that address a school's most basic safety and mental health needs before being used for more advanced practices. The School Safety and Security Committee's [Behavioral Health and Physical Security Criteria](#) guides this process, by sorting training, policies, equipment and programs into levels one to three, with level one being the most basic requirements.

The SSSC's revised Physical Security Baseline Criteria includes conducting physical security assessments of school buildings and surrounding areas, implementing campus and classroom security measures, and coordinating with local law enforcement. Schools must also establish secured communication systems, adopt emergency preparedness plans as required by law, and provide annual safety training for staff, along with ongoing specialized training.

The SSSC's Behavioral Health Baseline Criteria includes conducting a Student Assistance and Behavioral Health Support Assessment and establishing a Student Assistance Program (SAP), offering mental health services (such as a school counseling program). Schools should also

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<sup>9</sup> [School Safety and Security Guidance Related to Security Personnel. Pennsylvania Department of Education.](#)

<sup>10</sup> [School Safety and Security Guidance Related to Security Personnel. Pennsylvania Department of Education.](#)

<sup>11</sup> [School Safety and Security Guidance Related to Security Personnel. Pennsylvania Department of Education.](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Guiding Principles for School Resource Officer Programs \(usdoj.gov\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Guiding Principles for School Resource Officer Programs \(usdoj.gov\)](#)

conduct regular school climate surveys, train staff in de-escalation techniques, develop a trauma-informed approach plan, and establish a threat assessment team.

### **Looking Ahead: Current Trends & Recommendations**

Despite the Commonwealth's significant progress in school safety programs and policies since 2018, there are still critical areas that need further attention to fully protect and support students and staff. A recent Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) survey of educators and leaders identified student mental health as the top challenge in education this year, with nearly half of students needing services and support.<sup>14</sup> Key barriers include a scarcity of providers, stigma and reluctance to seek help, and lack of funding.<sup>15</sup> Threat assessment teams are crucial for identifying and intervening with students in crisis, but must work in tandem with strong mental and behavioral health services.<sup>16</sup> Pennsylvania's student-to-counselor ratio of 331:1 far exceeds the American School Counselor Association's recommended ratio of 250:1,<sup>17</sup> and some schools still struggle with mental health assessments<sup>18</sup> and threat assessment team confidence due to insufficient support.

To address these challenges, PCCD and the School Safety and Security Committee are committed to continuing to evaluate and revise school safety trainings, guidelines, and baseline criteria based on the needs and feedback of schools, law enforcement, and other stakeholders. To improve its threat assessment-related programming, PCCD and RSM recently collected nearly 750 survey responses from school-based threat assessment team members. The survey revealed that 88 percent of surveyed school entities have an active Threat Assessment Team, but only 38% of respondents felt highly skilled in collaborating with non-school based law enforcement, and just 37% in reporting threats or sharing information under FERPA and HIPAA protocols. Schools without active teams expressed less confidence in meeting legal requirements, highlighting the need for more support in these areas. Based on the findings, PCCD and RSM are updating training content and addressing identified gaps. Action steps PCCD is considering in collaboration with its partners include enhancing training on law enforcement collaboration, threat reporting, and information sharing.

To address identified gaps in school safety and security and ensure sustainable funding, we encourage state policymakers to continue to prioritize investment in the fundamentals of school safety, such as comprehensive support for mental health services, training and tools to facilitate bystander reporting (e.g., Safe2Say Something), enhancing threat assessment teams through training and technical assistance, and promoting safe school climates. Physical security measures are most effective with regular staff training and combining them with behavioral health strategies is key to maintaining safe school environments and preventing violence. In addition, providing predictable, long-term levels of funding allows school entities to confidently budget for school safety needs each year. In addition, maintaining non-competitive, formula-based approaches keeps schools from having to compete for critical funding.

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<sup>14</sup> [2024 State of Education. Pennsylvania School Boards Association.](#)

<sup>15</sup> [2024 State of Education. Pennsylvania School Boards Association.](#)

<sup>16</sup> [2nd Edition - PCCD Threat Assessment Model Procedures and Guidelines \(2022\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Student-to-School-Counselor Ratio 2022-2023. American School Counselor Association.](#)

<sup>18</sup> [PCCD K12 Threat Assessment Technical Assistance Training Network Survey Report \(2023-24\)](#)

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's investments in evidence-based prevention programs and physical security measures significantly improved the landscape of school safety, and PCCD remains committed to collaborating with the General Assembly and other partners in this essential work to continue building on this progress in the years ahead.