



Northeastern School District

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Testimony to the Pennsylvania House Education Committee

Topic: School Safety

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October 10, 2024

Thank you to Representative Schweyer and members of the House Education Committee for allowing me the time to share the realities of school safety and security that exist in school communities across our Commonwealth. This testimony will highlight the current stressors related to school safety and security that are impacting our schools and how future legislative action, support, and fiscal investment can provide the necessary enhancements that our schools desperately need.

My name is Dr. Jason Bottiglieri and I have served as a School Superintendent / Commissioned Officer for more than a decade. During that time, fulfilling the challenging task of keeping our children safe in the rural-remote part of Bradford County, Pennsylvania at the Wyalusing Area School District and currently, establishing that same expectation in York County, Pennsylvania at the Northeastern York School District. As a public-school leader having held numerous school leadership positions for more than 25 years, comprising five different school systems across three different Pennsylvania counties, my testimony today is not only from firsthand experience but also from my engagement with school leaders across the Commonwealth. As a result, I can confidently attest to the challenges we face as school leaders and the inequities that exists across Pennsylvania public schools.

Today, I am here representing the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS) as well as hundreds of colleagues across Pennsylvania. Most importantly I am here advocating for students who are eager to learn, eager to engage, and eager to explore in an environment absent from threats of harm, violence, and emotional distress that is on the rise from social media which is having detrimental effects on students' mental health. Please allow today's information sharing to serve as a strong sign of the willingness school leaders and PARSS members have, to continue collaboration with our legislators on the very important topic of school safety and security.

The safety of our students is the foundation on which all learning depends. In recent years, we've witnessed too many devastating incidents where that sense of safety has been shattered. When students do not feel safe, it not only disrupts the classroom environment but also hinders their emotional and academic growth. Today, schools are installing double-locked doors, securing entrances, conducting immediate background checks on visitors, using metal detectors, incorporating walkie-talkie communication, monitoring surveillance cameras, conducting lockdown drills and reunification protocols—all of which have become our new normal. Alongside this, schools now face growing challenges such as student vaping, mental health crises, and rising incidents of suicide ideation and numerous other mental health and safety circumstances that surpass the belief of many. These issues have become an unfortunate reality of modern education. Schools that don't meet these security standards are often seen as unsafe, opening them up to lawsuits and harsh media scrutiny, branded as unprepared, and chastised for failing to safeguard their students.

While PARSS member schools greatly appreciate the funding and recognition that schools have already received to enhance safety and mental health initiatives, it's clear that continuous improvement must be a shared priority across the state. The strides we've made in recent years, from securing entrances to implementing advanced safety protocols, are significant. These investments have helped protect our students and have strengthened our communities' trust in

our educational systems. However, the conversation needs to focus on what's next. The challenges we face are evolving, and schools are calling for additional support to meet those growing needs. This includes ensuring access to mental health professionals, faster response times from crisis agencies, and more integrated safety measures that address both physical security and emotional well-being. To truly move forward, we need to eliminate the barriers that prevent timely interventions and sustainable improvements. We must continue to push for a system that prioritizes the well-being of every child, recognizing that safety and mental health are not just operational concerns, but essential components of a thriving learning environment and a thriving community.

Key School Safety Concerns

As school superintendents, our foremost responsibility is to ensure the safety and well-being of our students and staff. The increasing complexity of school safety concerns requires not only immediate responses, but also long-term strategies that are adequately funded and supported. However, our ability to implement effective safety upgrades is severely hampered by funding sources. Recently, school districts were informed that the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) safety grant and mental health grant have been combined into one grant application. This decision forces us into a difficult position; districts must choose between providing proactive mental health support for our students and addressing essential safety upgrades. Both are critical, but this funding consolidation creates a dilemma that undermines our efforts to create a secure environment for our students.

Another pressing issue is police response time in rural-remote school districts across the Commonwealth. The reality is that when an incident occurs, every second counts. Delays in police response can escalate a manageable situation into a crisis. Feedback from school leaders stress the importance for legislative support encouraging a close connection with local law enforcement to ensure that response times are minimized and that our officers are trained to handle school-related incidents effectively. Establishing clear protocols and regular communication with law enforcement can significantly enhance our preparedness and response capabilities. In many rural-remote regions of the Commonwealth, schools are served by small police departments or by the Pennsylvania State Police. These regions of the state are often unfavorable locations for the experienced troopers. As a result, troopers new to the field are assigned to rural-remote areas of the state and stay only a few months, as new opportunities open in other more desirable areas. It is common to see new troopers' cycle through every 6-12 months. This system prevents school leaders from building relationships, trust, and collaboration with local troopers. As an additional complication, the consistent turnover doesn't allow for responding troopers to become very familiar with school officials, the student body, or the layout and design of our rural school buildings. These factors further complicate school safety improvement efforts.

As school leaders we rely heavily on our local law enforcement officers to support us during times of crisis. During situations that require building evacuation and the reunification of students, the concerns of school leaders continue to grow. In the rural-remote parts of the Commonwealth, reunification efforts are challenging. A superintendent of a small rural district shares,

“I am responsible for safety, which is my largest concern as I am responsible for many students and staff daily. I know our local police, state police, and sheriff's department will be here for the district in an event, but establishing a reunification process remains a challenge with resources and the inability to stay ahead of social media to control any situation. While we have plans, I worry we will not be able to enact our plans efficiently with our resources, limited communication strategies, and over-involvement from the media. It is the one thing that wakes me up at night.”

In this age of social media, misinformation spreads rapidly, complicating our ability to communicate effectively with our community. Distinguishing between fact and fiction has become increasingly difficult, and we must act quickly to counteract false narratives. The speed at which information travels means that a minor incident can escalate into widespread panic, distracting from our primary goal of education and community engagement. Schools often engage in proactive preventive measures, such as student assemblies that emphasize the seriousness of these issues, small group conversations led by school counselors, and peer mentorship programs that encourage students to support one another; just to name a few. Additionally, schools implement workshops on conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and social media safety to help students navigate everyday challenges in a healthy way. By fostering open communication and educating students on the importance of mental health and safety, these efforts aim to build a more aware and resilient school community, aiming to reduce the likelihood of crises.

The Safe-2-Say program, while well-intentioned, is contributing to administrative fatigue. The influx of tips—many of which are unfounded—requires extensive investigation, diverting valuable resources and attention away from our educational mission. As we sift through these reports, we are left grappling with the fear of not being prepared for every potential event. This apprehension is compounded by the phenomenon of “copycat” behavior, where students may imitate violent actions they've seen in the media. This creates an environment where educators and administrators must constantly be vigilant, which adds another layer of pressure to our already strained resources and deters rising school leaders from making the move to an administrative position. A superintendent shares concerns related to administrative time,

“The amount of time administrators spend after school hours tracking complaints and reports down is becoming a growing concern. Remember, not all the alleged reports/incidents are being reported on Safe-2-Say or other recordable metrics. In other words, these folks are always on call and any of the presented reports could be a real event. There is tremendous pressure associated with this outside of the day job.”

However, despite our substantial efforts, there are increasing incidents where students demonstrate such extreme behavior that communities across the Commonwealth are calling for increased legal accountability. The current limitation has become a growing source of frustration for school leaders, who are now calling for stronger criminal or regulatory measures to hold individuals accountable for spreading misinformation or false narratives on social media. These actions not only undermine our efforts but also create unnecessary panic and alarm within our

school communities. It's crucial that those responsible for inciting fear are brought to face consequences, ensuring that our focus remains on the real safety and well-being of our students.

The concern about extreme violent behavior among students, which has recently seen an emergence as early as kindergarten, is particularly alarming. This troubling trend necessitates a proactive approach, including investment in early intervention programs that focus on social-emotional learning and conflict resolution. A prioritization of ensuring that all schools, including early learning programs, are equipped with mental health professionals empowered to address these behaviors before they escalate has become a necessity.

As school leaders look to continue to enhance their hardened safety efforts, superintendents' express frustration related to the lengthy delays in obtaining the free security assessment service provided by the Pennsylvania State Police Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Team (RVAT). These experts specialize in threat analysis, explosive effects on structural design, and target hardening techniques. This team and their assessment results provide identification of specific vulnerabilities within our schools, allowing us to prioritize our safety upgrades effectively.

However, the waiting list is extensive, with schools often delayed up to a year after initiating a request. There are more than 3,200 public K-12 school buildings in Pennsylvania and according to the Pennsylvania State Police Commissioner's Report 2024, 167 RVAT assessments were completed on public K-12 schools by July 2024. This report also indicates that, as of July 2024, there were 184 schools on the RVAT waiting list, eight of those are buildings in my district-Northeastern York School District. Without the necessary funding and support to increase their manpower and funding for schools to implement their recommendations, we risk falling short of correcting the identified safety vulnerabilities. While there are other vendors available for this type of assessment, they often cost thousands of dollars for each building assessment.

As we confront the rising frequency of threats to schools and the various safety circumstances that are brought to the school doorstep, it is essential to address these challenges with both effectiveness and efficiency. Fortunately, many of the threats reported in recent weeks have proven to be hoaxes, however, these incidents heighten panic and fear within our communities. These false alarms drain valuable resources and divert our attention from where it truly belongs. The ripple effect of these incidents is now extending beyond the classroom, impacting community events like football games, where families should feel safe and secure. It's clear that the stress and fear from these hoaxes are taking a toll on the broader school community.

To effectively respond to these ongoing challenges, we urgently need increased funding support to enhance our safety protocols, invest in mental health personnel, and strengthen our partnerships with local law enforcement. With additional financial resources, we can ensure that our schools are secure environments where students and families can thrive without fear.

School Safety Legislative Mandates

Act 44 of 2018 established a mandate for each school district to have a School Safety and Security Coordinator appointed by the Superintendent. The law also required that this additional unfunded, mandated position be a school district administrator. For many school districts in Pennsylvania, and for a majority of PARSS member districts, this responsibility was added to the

already full plate of the district's Superintendent. No funding was provided to support this additional responsibility in 2018 and still today, six years later, no funding is provided to support this important responsibility. Additionally, the position requires many hours of training with no funding support.

School leaders agree that having an identified person responsible for school safety as the 'go-to person' is important, however, our school leaders had a full plate long before 2018. Fast forward to today, in 2024 school leaders have been required to simply find a larger plate. Many PARSS member districts can't share or delegate this responsibility because there simply aren't enough administrators. The majority of districts most certainly can't afford to hire another administrator to fulfill this role; while vital in today's challenging climate, there is no funding to support the position.

Four years after Act 44, the General Assembly approved Act 55 of 2022. This law established new requirements for school safety and security training for all school employees in Pennsylvania. Prior to the passage of Act 55, school safety and security training for school employees was limited to three hours of instruction every five years. Act 55 amended this requirement and increased the training requirement to three hours of instruction annually. School leaders agree, safety training is essential as our safety scenarios, threats, and mental health incidents rise. With a growing list of annual training mandates, the average district doesn't have enough hours of professional development time available to meet the pre-existing list of requirements. In some cases, districts are being forced to determine which mandated trainings receive priority and which ones are bypassed.

Act 18 of 2019 established the requirement for all school entities to develop threat assessment teams. In part, a threat assessment seeks to determine if a person's behavior poses a threat of violence to themselves or others. That's quite a significant request—some might even call it unreasonable—to expect school employees to take on that level of liability and responsibility after merely earning a 'credential' by watching a few training videos. Threat Assessment training is offered for free through PCCD via online modules; however, the time employees need to complete the training is not, nor is the impact on other priorities they must set aside to conduct a threat assessment when required.

To meet the expectations associated with the threat assessment process, many districts have chosen to establish numerous teams for the district and sometimes a team exists at each school building. In some cases, this was done for efficiency because of travel barriers between district school buildings. In other cases, it is because the volume has risen at an alarming pace. Superintendents have shared collective concerns:

“We've experienced a significant rise in the number of threat assessments being conducted in our schools. It has been difficult to assemble team members who can efficiently respond to the threat assessment process, and concerns among staff about the potential liability of making an incorrect assessment is creating hesitation.”

“Threat assessments have doubled from this same time last year. We conducted 10 threat assessments during the month of September: this is alarming.”

“Law enforcement agencies often do not provide a definitive declaration on whether a threat is credible, leaving it up to the school districts to make that determination. This creates uncertainty and puts a heavy burden on school administrators, who may not have the expertise or resources to properly assess such threats.”

Senate Bill 700, signed into law on July 11, 2024, required Pennsylvania school districts to have at least one full-time school security personnel on duty during each school day. The Bill also separately provided for the reimbursement of costs associated with the hiring and training of one school security personnel, up to \$50,000. However, this line item was not included as part of the 2024-2025 budget which has left school districts with the financial responsibility of this mandate, and thus has created another unfunded mandate that comes with a heavy price tag. While the perspectives on this mandate carry mixed-opinions from school leaders, the frustration and disappointment associated with the failed full-funding commitment to support the mandate is consistent among all school leaders across the Commonwealth. Expanding on the school security personnel mandate, a superintendent shared;

“Not allowing a school security guard to have the same limited powers as a School Police Officer is difficult. This law presents safety concerns for districts where there is limited access to active or retired law enforcement officers. Consider legislative action that allows school security guards to have at least detaining rights, so if a fight breaks out in front of the school security guard, they have the authority to intervene and detain. Verbal commands are not enough in this type of situation.”

“The SRO bill has not been helpful for our district. I can appreciate what the legislature was trying to do, but when you create a law that carries the same requirements for our two building, 650 student district as it does for urban and suburban schools, it just isn't practical or realistic. At least if it was fully funded by the state it would be an easier explanation to the community.”

“An unarmed school security guard carries minimal impact. If the law was deemed important enough to pass, then what good is a simple security guard... it's an expensive hall monitor.”

“The idea of an SRO in schools is really great; however, we don't have the resources to make that happen. Our local borough can barely staff their regular patrols, let alone support someone full-time in our school district. Some districts have contracted these services but many times those positions are not filled.”

“In my area, it's been very hard to find local (reasonable distance) providers for the required NASRO school police officer training. I have several local officers who would like to become court-appointed SPOs for after-school activities and to

work as substitutes for our full-time officers, but given their full-time work schedules, they cannot find time to complete 40 hours of in-person or synchronous NASRO training. I would ask that such a training be provided as an online, asynchronous certification course.”

Financial Commitment to Unfunded and Underfunded Mandates

As school leaders, we are tired of being forced to make choices between the safety of our kids and the numerous other financially competing needs in a school budget. It is entirely irresponsible to force our school leaders into a financial tug-of-war between funding student protection, purchasing educational materials, investing in AP programs, or repairing a decades-old leaking roof. These decisions unjustly push school leaders into an unmanageable balancing act. The current financial support from state funds, while very much appreciated, fall drastically short of the actual need, barely meeting the drop in a bucket metaphor.

School leaders often become victims of compromise, forced to make financial decisions that set them up for public scrutiny, second-guessing, and public criticism over financial investment efforts for school safety. What is the correct amount of money to spend on school safety efforts? What is the correct amount of money to spend on hardening our schools? What is the correct amount of money to spend on armed security or police officers for our schools? And, what is the correct amount of money to spend on mental health programs, school counselors, social workers, prevention programs, etc.? I often hear “you can never be too safe”, “better to be safe than sorry”, or “why don’t we have...”. The reality of school safety is, like most things, determined by financial investment.

School leaders promote the incorporation of evidence and researched based curriculum programs and materials to support student learning. With school safety, every time another tragedy occurs, experts appear to analyze the chain of events, report on what the school did wrong, and promote the opportunity for more safety vendors to claim that they have the magic answer. School leaders have been forced to become experts in safety and mental health. We are now required, not only as a state mandate but also as a growing community expectation, to do so much more than ever intended, but with so much less to do it.

Schools continue to take on more and soon that bubble is going to burst; the growing pace simply can’t be maintained. We have seen evidence of this in recent years, while the increase in mandates rise and expectations for our teachers reach troubling heights, we have clearly seen a hurting education system struggle with high quality teacher recruitment. An exodus of teachers leaving the profession and high school graduates no longer interested in pursuing education as a career choice are the realities we face across the Commonwealth. And while the list of contributing factors is long, we know that school safety plays a significant role.

The request is simple, fully fund all the priorities and mandates that have already been established. Fully fund the Physical Security and the Mental Health Baseline Standards developed by the PCCD School Safety & Security Committee (SSSC). If the standards are important enough to be identified as ‘baseline’ priorities, then provide the full funding that allows all schools to achieve the established expectations. It is imperative that through legislative action, a financial commitment to schools is made that allows school leaders to get off

the sea-saw balancing act of how best to spend the limited school safety allocation and fully fund school safety priorities that protect our children and educators.

School safety funding cannot continue to be another example of the inequities that exist in our state. A superintendent shared frustration,

“Districts are mandated to implement safety and security legislation and there isn’t a reliable funding source to implement all the initiatives. There is funding for 1-2 years, but no guarantees beyond this for PCCD grant monies, etc.”

We need your help; our kids deserve it. We need more legislators committed to making school safety a priority, not by setting more expectations, mandates, or required program development, but rather with simple funding that supports adding people. Adding program after program will fail because we do not have the people to implement them. We have become specialists in what is needed, how to get there, and the associated laws and mandates that are already in place. School leaders share a common concern that as the state provides more funding, more policy makers become involved in the decision-making process. I believe there is an appropriate balance between the two that can be achieved between accountability and legislative mandate.

PCCD School Safety and Mental Health Grants

The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) is charged with the management of state allocated funds through a grant application process. In recent years, both meritorious and competitive grant funds have been offered to school districts to support efforts related to physical security enhancements and behavioral health improvements. These grant funds have been made available because of legislative action and school code bills.

In fiscal year 2022-2023, the Pennsylvania legislature provided \$190 million to fund and support Pennsylvania school districts with necessary improvements, of which \$95 million was dedicated to mental health initiatives and \$95 million was dedicated to physical security enhancements. The Northeastern York School District (NESD) received \$322,261 which the legislation split evenly between two separate grant applications: 1) physical security enhancements and 2) behavioral health improvements.

During fiscal year 2023-2024 (FY23-24), the grant allocation provided to Pennsylvania school districts decreased. FY23-24 saw a decrease in PCCD grant funds, providing \$90 million in funding for school mental health, of which NESD received \$152,277. PCCD grant funding also provided \$18.6 million for physical security enhancements. In an unpredicted twist from the prior year, legislative action resulted in a categorical funding amount for school safety determined by student enrollment. Pennsylvania school districts received either \$30,000, \$35,000, \$40,000, or \$45,000, which substantially decreased the ability for districts to address the growing need of physical safety in schools. This shift from prior years hindered planned safety improvements for PARSS member schools and now has school leaders continuously questioning the future sustainability of school safety improvements that were put into place in prior years.

During fiscal year 2024-2025 (FY24-25), PCCD grant funding took another hit when the Pennsylvania legislature once again decreased the overall amount of funding support. FY24-25 provided \$100 million to support physical security enhancements and behavioral health improvements for Pennsylvania schools. This was a combined application, a different approach than years prior. The NESD received \$177,986 in total to support both our physical security and behavioral health needs. FY24-25 allocation for the NESD represents an approximate 45% decrease in PCCD grant funding from just two years prior.

The three-year decline in funding raises significant concerns about the level of attention being given to two of the key issues facing school districts across the Commonwealth: school safety/security and mental health. Additionally, the rigid process associated with obtaining grant approval from PCCD continues to frustrate school leaders. School leaders collectively share frustration,

“The lengthy processing of these grant applications that have historically plagued the PCCD, is causing significant delays in making the necessary enhancements for which the grant is designed. In the recent past, schools in my region see grant application approvals taking more than a year.”

“The trivial demands and pushback from PCCD grant reviewers delay our ability to make purchases and implement programs with the funds provided, often forcing the new initiative to be delayed into the following school year.”

Superintendents express concern, frustration, and confusion related to supplement/supplant requirements. There is strong support for eliminating the supplement requirement as districts grow in skepticism of their ability to sustain previous purchases paid from PCCD grant funds. The following is provided as an example of our feared uncertainty: A school district uses PCCD grant funds to purchase video surveillance security camera equipment and license fees. The annual license fee is feared to be deemed supplantation and thus denied as a legitimate grant fund usage on future PCCD school safety grant applications. This circumstance then requires the district to absorb the financial responsibility for the cost associated with security camera license fees.

Historically, competitive grant funding has been made available on an annual basis. During fiscal year 2023-2024, PCCD announced a competitive school grant application opportunity where \$32 million was made available for eligible applicants to write a grant for up to \$450,000 to fund physical security and behavioral health needs. Eligible applicants included: school districts, intermediate units, area career and technical schools, charter schools, cyber charter schools, regional charter schools, approved private schools, chartered school for the education of the deaf or the blind, or private residential rehabilitative institutions; and municipalities, law enforcement agencies, and approved vendors.

With the long list of eligible entities, PARSS member school districts portray concerns of a disadvantage. Forcing schools to compete with each other and other organizations for critical safety and mental health funding is not just unfair, it's counterproductive. Our small and rural schools simply don't have the same resources or grant writing capacity as larger districts. This

leaves many of our students without the essential support they need, simply because their schools couldn't navigate the competitive grant process. Safety and mental health shouldn't be treated as luxuries – they are fundamental needs for every student, in every community. Even though the distribution of these competitive grant funds is supposed to represent a geographic distribution across the Commonwealth, our member school superintendents express numerous concerns,

“The way safety has been supported by the state favors larger more affluent schools. Making a grant competitive favors larger districts who have the personnel to write the grants and administer them, and, at times, have more political influence.”

“In my region of rural Pennsylvania, our districts almost never receive competitive grant money. If there are going to be mandates, it would be helpful to ensure funding for those mandates, so we are not left scrambling to figure out how we pay for this. We don't have the ability to generate significant funds through tax increases so anything that is mandated and not funded has an outsized impact on our school district compared to more suburban and urban districts.”

Grant funding for school safety and mental health programs should never be competitive. The well-being and safety of students are universal needs that every school district must address, regardless of location, size, or socioeconomic status. Making these critical resources contingent upon a competitive grant process leaves some districts, particularly those in underserved or rural areas, at a significant disadvantage. Competitive grants often favor districts with the capacity to hire grant writers, maintain robust data collection systems, and demonstrate a high level of readiness for implementation, which not all districts can afford. This creates a disparity where the schools most in need of funding may be the least equipped to secure it, exacerbating existing inequities in education and student well-being.

Schools cannot reliably plan long-term initiatives or hire permanent staff, like counselors or security personnel, based on short-term or one-time competitive grants. Mental health and safety programs require sustained, continuous investment to be effective. Schools forced to rely on competitive grants may find themselves cutting successful programs simply because they couldn't secure the next round of funding. This lack of stability undermines the very purpose of these programs, which is to provide reliable, ongoing support to students who need it most.

Safety and mental health personnel are foundational to a student's ability to learn and thrive in school. When grant funding for these areas is competitive, it implies that these are optional or supplementary services rather than core elements of a successful education system. These programs are not just important during times of crisis, but essential for preventing crises from occurring. By making funding for these services competitive, we risk a reactive rather than proactive approach, where only the districts that manage to secure grants can implement preventive measures, while others may be left to manage the aftermath of preventable incidents.

Supporting the Growing Needs of Behavioral Health

With the recent combining of grant funds into one application, along with the decreased funding allocation, district leaders have been conflicted in making choices between prioritizing efforts focused on behavioral health or physical safety. It's important to note that school leaders are aware that the funding allocation can be divided between the two areas but prefer a separation of the two focused topics due to the public perception of equal importance. Typically, districts like and appreciate choices. In this case, the combining of the grant has left school leaders to defend stakeholder scrutiny about the prioritization of two very different school safety efforts; physical security versus behavioral health. Superintendents shared,

“We are advocating for a separation of physical security grants and mental health grants. Both are worthy of state level funding through appropriations and grants; however, we would ask that the state NOT make districts choose one over the other but offer opportunities for separate and full funding for both.”

The drastic rise in the mental health needs of adolescents pose the biggest challenge for our school leaders. Often times we find, through attempted interventions by school counselors, that parents and their child share the same mental health challenge. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the mental health circumstances impacting students is generational. Nevertheless, we remain committed to addressing the barrier to student success, but that must become a shared responsibility and must contain funding for personnel to more effectively address the growing crisis.

Schools across the Commonwealth consistently share how the actions of one have a negative impact on many. Mental health situations not only impact the individual student experiencing a crisis, but often the situation fosters throughout the school building, into the classrooms, hallways, common areas, and lavatory facilities, eventually flowing outdoors. These situations lessen the time teachers have available to focus on instruction and learning. Significant situations of a mental health crisis are at a high, causing classrooms to be emptied, hallways to be cleared, and buildings to be locked down. In a recent experience a school leader shared,

“This week a student made significant threats of suicide, self-harm, and a committed desire to ‘not go quietly’. The student stated, ‘if I were you, I would be worried about me tonight’ to attempted administrative intervention. Attempts to communicate with the county crisis department have consistently been met with resistance and limited staffing excuses resulting in extreme frustration for us. School Resource Officers already in place at the district are reluctant to address the situation through the mental health system, involuntary commitment for psychiatric placement, and hospitalization, as the juvenile laws combined with law enforcement regulations don't often work collaboratively. In this situation, the student caused two school buildings to be locked down after running across campuses, further escalating the situation. Taking the mental health crisis and adding layers of school safety to the complex situation caused avoidable panic. The student became uncooperative with responding police officers, was eventually tackled on the front lawn, handcuffed, and escorted involuntarily to the hospital,

only to be subsequently released a few hours later. The mental health crisis and suicidal ideation resurfaced at the school the very next day.”

I hear these situations from school leaders across the entire state. These situations are real and are occurring more frequently than what is widely recognized. The calls for mental health resources cannot go unheard. It is important to recognize that schools have responded and incorporated multiple systems of support and continue to meet all the state mandates in this area.

Most schools are not equipped to meet the mental health needs of students and families. Teachers, counselors, and other school employees are overloaded. They simply can't do more, and this area is not the expertise of many. So, what is the answer and how can legislators help this growing crisis?

It's time for a thorough review of juvenile justice laws, policies, and practices that influence law enforcement's ability to support schools when situations escalate to this level. Additionally, the medical community must have the authority and expertise to fully grasp the profound impact of a student's mental health—not only on the individual but also on other students who are striving to exercise their constitutional right to a high-quality education.

People Not Programs

Schools are asking for an increased investment from the state to ensure that systems which are already in place are fully funded so we can stop getting the 'busy signal' on the other end when we call for help. County crisis agencies are understaffed and cover large areas that prevent any type of expedited response, leaving our schools with limited options and no help during mental health situations. School leaders have shared their pleas to support a crisis worker to be assigned to each district. That is a tell-tale sign of how large of a problem we are experiencing in our schools.

County Children and Youth Service agencies continue to face a high number of vacancies and offer inadequate pay, hindering recruitment efforts and contributing to the declining interest in this field. School leaders across the state share concerns about delayed response times from child protective services, limited communication with school officials, and a lack of collaboration that supports the child. Additionally, there is often no confirmation that safety interventions are in place. These issues frequently return to our schools, resulting in repeated pleas for assistance. We need a more efficient system that prioritizes the well-being of our children.

Moreover, school personnel are drowning. Amid growing concerns related to our abilities to respond to this growing mental health need, it is forcing districts to question if we are properly equipped to serve as what has become the primary safety net for these ongoing crises. When county agencies cannot respond swiftly, schools are left to fill the gap with insufficient resources. This puts enormous strain on teachers, administrators, and counselors who are not crisis intervention experts. While educators are dedicated to the well-being of their students, they are being asked to manage situations that require specialized care and highly trained professional intervention. Without a well-coordinated system between schools and county services, vulnerable children continue to slip through the cracks, exacerbating issues like trauma, neglect, and behavioral challenges. It's critical that state officials recognize the urgency of the situation

and prioritize the necessary funding to bolster both county services and school-based mental health support, ensuring a rapid and reliable safety net for every student in need.

Competing Budget Interests

As operational costs to school districts continue to surpass the available funding, school districts are often forced to make difficult choices regarding resource allocation. The prioritization of project investments becomes a daunting task for school leaders, as they must weigh the immediate needs of their schools against long-term goals and the constraints of tight budgets. School leaders are generally familiar and comfortable with decision-making in areas like daily district operational costs, long-term budget planning, and the prioritization of maintenance projects. However, there is a collective concern that these same rigorous budget constraints should not extend to areas impacting student safety and behavioral health.

While districts may need to defer or scale back mechanical upgrades or academic initiatives, the idea of compromising on essential services that protect students' physical well-being or address their mental and emotional needs is unsettling. In many cases, leaders believe that student safety, mental health services, and behavioral support programs should be safeguarded from cuts, as these directly influence a student's ability to succeed in a secure and supportive learning environment. Consequently, districts are advocating for more stable, designated funding streams to ensure that critical safety and health initiatives are not left vulnerable to budget shortfalls. A superintendent noted,

“Our district is underfunded by nearly \$3,500 per student. Annually we are fighting to determine which positions/programs to cut and which to keep. School safety is a priority, but it is difficult, if not impossible to balance what things to sacrifice in order to pay for school safety measures and what school safety measures to ignore in favor of educational programs.”

“School districts are continually balancing a variety of competing financial demands, often leaving essential aspects like school safety underfunded. Educational leaders are tasked with allocating limited resources across numerous critical areas, such as academic programs, technology upgrades, staff salaries, infrastructure maintenance, and extracurricular activities. Many of these areas come with pressing demands—ensuring up-to-date curriculum and technology, maintaining competitive teacher salaries to avoid staff shortages, and complying with federal or state mandates for academic performance.”

School leaders have noted that technology investments are often prioritized due to the increasing demand for modernized classrooms, online learning capabilities, and keeping pace with educational trends. Additionally, many districts are faced with crumbling infrastructure and outdated buildings that require significant repair and renovation, which also compete for already stretched financial resources.

Another significant factor is the need to manage rising healthcare and employee benefit costs for school employees. These mandatory costs tend to eat away at discretionary budgets, limiting what's left for other projects and initiatives. Likewise, special education services, which are

legally mandated, continue to grow in expense, further reducing the available funds that can be applied to non-mandated areas, including safety improvements and mental health services.

As a result, school safety measures—such as security personnel, surveillance systems, mental health counselors, anti-bullying programs, and behavioral health initiatives—are often left to compete for funding with other priorities. Since these safety and behavioral programs do not always produce immediate, quantifiable results, they can sometimes be deprioritized in favor of more tangible, short-term outcomes like new equipment or improved test scores.

Furthermore, while state grant programs may temporarily boost school safety initiatives, these resources are feared to be non-recurring. When those funds dry up, districts are deeply concerned about the likelihood of struggling to maintain safety measures without a dedicated, long-term funding solution. In many cases, when faced with tough budgetary decisions, districts are forced to reduce or delay safety initiatives, leaving students and staff potentially vulnerable in the process.

Without a clear prioritization or funding mechanism, student safety and well-being risks being placed on the back burner. Leaders are calling for increased state funding specifically earmarked for safety enhancements and mental health personnel.

Call to Action

We have a collective obligation to ensure that every student can attend school without fear. School safety is not just about preventing the worst-case scenario; it's about fostering an environment where students can thrive. School leaders are asking for full funding so that the prioritization of safety is more than a catch phrase. Safeguard the physical and emotional well-being of students, as well as those dedicated professionals who have chosen a career to make a meaningful impact in their lives.

As administrators and school personnel are forced to become more involved with school safety and security, the concern of liability protection increases. A superintendent shared,

“I become more concerned with liability protection of our employees. Additional legal protection for our staff on the ‘front line’ would be a help to many. Especially in our small rural areas where administrators are doing everything.”

Consider legal improvements for serious consequences related to threatening behavior. Superintendents collectively ask for increased consequences,

“Clear legal consequences help protect individuals and communities by deterring these harmful actions. When students (or parents) know there are serious repercussions for posting and/or re-posting threats, they are less likely to engage in such behavior. A law could hold individuals accountable for their actions. This ensures that those who threaten others understand the seriousness of their behavior and the impact it can have on victims and the broader community. With legal ramifications it can help prevent escalation. By addressing threats early, we can intervene before they become viral.”

Ensuring the guaranteed long-term sustainability of funding for school security is vital for school leaders to create safe learning environments where students can thrive. Consistent financial support allows schools to implement and maintain comprehensive security measures, including hiring qualified personnel, upgrading infrastructure, and investing in advanced technology. Long-term funding not only enhances immediate safety protocols but also enables schools to develop proactive strategies that address evolving security challenges. By securing stable resources, districts can establish ongoing training programs for staff and law enforcement, foster collaborative relationships with community agencies, and support mental health personnel that contribute to overall student well-being. In an era where threats to school safety are increasingly prevalent, a commitment to sustained funding is essential for building resilience and ensuring that all students and staff can feel secure within their educational environments.

Support for expanding training opportunities related to immersive safety scenarios is needed. The Pennsylvania School Safety Institute (PennSSI) provides those who are tasked with keeping students and staff safe with immersive scenarios and classroom trainings, and works to equip individuals with the skills to address emerging security threats that may occur in school buildings. After recently attending a training at PennSSI, I was quickly convinced that it was the best school safety training experience that I have ever engaged in. Reservations for school teams fill quickly and are currently booking deep into 2025. With only one facility in the Commonwealth, located in Mechanicsburg, and the limited availability, an investment in replicating this type of experience for schools across the Commonwealth to have easier repetitive access is a strong desire.

Lastly, I must again stress the importance of fully funding the legal mandate enacted this school year that requires each district to have at least one full-time school security personnel on duty during each school day. It's important to recognize that the legislative discussion of providing each district with \$50,000 (if funded) for this requirement, falls drastically short of actual costs. The total cost of one School Resource Officer for NESD is approximately \$150,000.

On behalf of our students, communities, and all Pennsylvanians concerned with the climbing rate of mental health scenarios facing our children, and the need for continuous funding for school safety efforts, I would like to thank this governing body and ask for full consideration of this testimony. Making a commitment to increased sustainable funding and legal enhancements can decrease the growing incidence of school safety events, which will allow our school leaders to focus on their primary mission; ensuring that children in the Commonwealth have the constitutionally protected right to learn, grow, and thrive, absent from distraction.

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