



**Testimony of the  
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding  
School Safety**

**Presented to the  
House Education Committee  
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**By  
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Good morning Chairman Hickernell, Chairman Roebuck and members of the committee. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to discuss this critically important topic with you today.

As a mother, grandmother, and lifelong educator my heart aches for the senseless loss of lives and destruction in the wake of yet another mass school shooting. As the President of PSEA, I am anxious and worried for the safety of our students and my fellow school employees.

They're anxious and worried too.

Scott Beigel was a geography teacher at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. He was shot and killed as he attempted to barricade his classroom door after ushering students to safety. I think most educators would do the same. And so many have.

But just think of what it means that millions of educators wake up every day wondering what they would do if they were put in the position Scott Beigel was placed in, and worrying about their students, their families, and themselves as they kiss their own children goodbye.

It's a horrific new reality. But you know something? I'm tired of just worrying. I'm sick of just being anxious.

I'm ready for clear and decisive action.

This time *must* be different. This time, we must change the cycle of the past.

And you can be the ones to do it.

PSEA is a member driven organization. We respect the expertise and experience of those in our public schools, because they are on the front lines, are the first responders, and are those closest to students who may become adrift. And so, I asked what *they* thought we should do.

In just one week I received nearly 1,000 thoughtful and articulate replies. I have a summary of them here with me today in a report that we are also sharing with the Governor and will make available to anyone who wants to read it.

I would like to share with you the suggestions that received the broadest support.

**1. Increase appropriations for school safety grants that can be used to provide funding for:**

- a. Physical improvements, like secure entrances, panic buttons, door jammers, even streaming video shared directly with a local law enforcement station;
- b. Active shooter training programs; and
- c. School resource officers.

Addressing the physical safety of school buildings was one of the most common responses we received. I would ask that you please work with your fellow lawmakers and Governor Wolf to secure additional funding for Pennsylvania Safe Schools grants in the final FY '18-19 budget.

Currently, the program is funded at \$8.2 million – with 60% of the funds set-aside for districts to hire and maintain school security personnel, and 40% set aside for evidence-based programs such as positive behavior supports, conflict resolution, restorative justice programs, and diversion programs. In addition to increasing funding for the grant program, PSEA recommends that the current distribution, and priority determination within the school code should be reviewed and revised to ensure maximum flexibility for school entities to utilize grant funding to address their specific needs.

To better understand such needs, we strongly recommend more safe school audits that evaluate facilities, personnel, and school climate and are based on state specified standards and guidelines. The audits should be conducted on a regular basis, and at a minimum as part of the district's 5-year strategic planning process.

There is no legal requirement for facility audits nor is there a one-stop resource for information, supports and best practices. Without regular audits based on standard guidance, it is impossible to determine the scope of safety threats our schools face or to help officials prioritize resources and improvements to address the threat.

**2. Focus on student wellness and invest in more school counselors, school psychologists, social workers, school nurses, behavioral specialists, home and school visitors and paraprofessionals.**

Much of the debate around school safety has centered on mental health. However, we believe mental health is just one component of student wellness.

There are students in every school in Pennsylvania who struggle with physical and emotional health. Those students need support and encouragement – not blame and shame. Research shows the overwhelming impact of ensuring every student feels supported by at least one adult in school. These meaningful connections help students navigate challenges and help ensure their basic needs are met.

School employees are on the front line - they can be the first individuals to spot changes in student behaviors and mood perhaps before anyone else. Sometimes the behavior is impossible to ignore – a student may lash out, cause harm to himself or other students or the teacher. Or maybe a student's problems are manifested in more subtle ways – changes in how the student interacts with his peers, or in how a student expresses themselves in assignments. An educator can be the first to notice any warning signals of an underlying illness or concern for a student and could be the essential first connector for getting that student the help he or she needs.

But the ability for school employees to truly observe their students - and then connect them to the kind of supports they need - is greatly restricted when the teacher has 30 other kids in their class, no teacher's aides or additional support, and feels daily pressure to improve his or her students' scores on the PSSAs and Keystones.

This is the reality for most of our teachers today.

If we are to genuinely engage in a constructive dialogue around the necessary actions to be taken to prevent the next Parkland, then we must recognize and acknowledge the truth of what's happening in our schools today. The ability of our teachers – and all adults working in our schools - to connect with students and intervene at the earliest sign of despair, before a crisis, has been severely hampered by a lack of resources and intensified focus on standardized testing at the expense of social and emotional supports and learning.

There aren't enough paraprofessionals, and certified, trained professionals - school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, behavioral specialists, school nurses, and home and school visitors - working in our schools to support the behavioral and mental health needs of our students. Not only are the resources falling short to help ensure certified professionals in our schools, but our laws fall short as well.

Pennsylvania law does not require school districts to employ certified school counselors, school psychologists, social workers, or home and school visitors.

This means that some teachers and students don't have a school counselor or other certified mental health professional to turn to for support and assistance in their time of need. Even if the school district does employ a counselor, that counselor is likely responsible for nearly 500 students on average – *double* the caseload recommended by the American School Counselor Association. The other reality is that many school counselors – and school psychologists, school nurses, social workers, and home and school visitors – are tasked with a variety of other duties like mandated reports and paperwork that greatly limit the time that can be spent focused on building relationships with students and supporting their behavioral and mental health needs.

Often after tragedies like Columbine, Sandy Hook, and now Parkland, there is a great deal of attention on building infrastructure improvements. We heard many of those suggestions from PSEA members, as I outlined above. Those improvements certainly have their place, however, PSEA strongly urges that we not lose sight of the necessity of longer-term investments to ensure there is an infrastructure of human capacity to support our students on a daily basis.

**3. Establish threat assessment and crisis teams made up of law enforcement, school employed mental health professionals, teachers and support staff and administrators.**

If there is true hope for addressing the underlying causes of student violence, rather than merely reacting to that violence, that hope very likely lies in establishing threat assessment and crisis teams. PSEA is working with the Superintendent, Principal, and School Board associations. Last week, our organizations offered webinars for our members on threat assessments because we believe they are critical to keep students safe. We will continue to work with these groups on this issue, and I hope you will help us to bring these teams to every district in the Commonwealth.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists threat assessment is a violence prevention strategy that involves: (a) identifying student threats to commit a violent act, (b) determining the seriousness of the threat, and (c) developing intervention plans that protect

potential victims and address the underlying problem or conflict that led to the threatening behavior. The goal of threat assessment is to keep schools safe and help predict and prevent tragedies like shootings, self-harm, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and criminal activity. Threat assessment teams also provide an alternative to zero tolerance policies that have proven to be counterproductive.

Access to a team that is dedicated to creating individualized assessments of each threat, and to recommending a course of action that involves considering a complete wellness would be an enormously important resource for Pennsylvania's schools, and I would strongly encourage the legislature to adopt a set of guidelines, like the well-known Virginia Assessment Program.

When coupled with a greater emphasis on student wellness, these interdisciplinary teams *can* make our schools safer, and will help countless students.

Once again, according to the National Association of School Psychologists:

Effective procedures to assess threats include establishing district-wide policies and procedures, creating interdisciplinary assessment teams, and educating the school community.

**Establish district-wide policies and procedures.** All threats of violence must be taken seriously and investigated, so it is important to have a specific policy and established procedures for dealing with student threats. The policy should clarify the role of educators in relation to that of law enforcement, identify the threat assessment team, and specify the team's training requirements.

**Create an interdisciplinary assessment team.** Effective threat assessment is based on the combined efforts of a school-based team including representatives from administration, school employed mental health professionals, and law enforcement. In unusually complex cases, the team might draw upon professionals in the local community. The interdisciplinary team approach improves the efficiency and scope of the assessment process and reduces the risk of observer bias.

**Educate the school community about threat assessment.** Implementation of a threat assessment approach hinges on educating the school community about the importance of a positive school climate that focuses on providing help for students before problems escalate into violence. Schools should regularly assess their climate, with particular emphasis on students' trust in adults and willingness to seek help for problems and concerns. All members of the community, especially students, must understand the distinction between seeking help to prevent violence and "snitching," or informing on someone for personal gain. Written materials should be publicly available and specific efforts should be made to explain relevant aspects of the threat assessment policy to staff members, students, and families.

#### **4. Work with Congress to protect the Title I, II and IV funding designed to provide healthy and secure learning environments.**

The President's recently released 2019 budget proposal provides no increases in Title I funding; eliminates all Title II funding, which provides critical resources for educator training and professional development including training for positive school climate and emergency preparedness; and eliminates funding for virtually all Title IV programs which are specifically

authorized under ESSA to provide students with a safe and healthy learning environment. This funding proposal directly undermines the ability of states and schools to fully utilize federal programs authorized by ESSA to improve school safety. It would be a critical mistake to defund these programs given the recent events which highlight the need to provide support for school safety efforts.

**5. Provide space and opportunity for school districts to work together to find customized solutions.**

Pennsylvania is a diverse state; Tioga and Philadelphia counties are very different places, and a one size fits all solution is simply impractical in the school safety context. As you consider ideas to make our schools safe, it is my hope you will allow flexibility and local autonomy in order to enable locally elected officials, parents, and schools to determine how best to use the resources available to them.

**Differing ideas**

As you know, PSEA has a broad and diverse membership with a variety of perspectives and solutions. We view this diversity of opinions as healthy and recognize that regardless of where a public-school employee falls on this debate we all come from one place—the desire to keep schools and students safe.

As may be expected, a number of PSEA members also shared divergent thoughts spanning the gamut from expanded gun control, to arming educators (SB 383). I feel it is only fair to pass along those sentiments, although they are not included in our five recommendations. I respect the opinions of those who support SB 383, just as I respect the opinions of those who support stricter gun control measures.

But we at PSEA are a “small d” democratic organization and have a process to consider legislation. In this case a Legislative Committee elected by our colleagues, a Board of Directors elected by our colleagues and a statewide team of officers elected by our colleagues had a chance to consider SB 383 and unanimously voted to oppose the legislation. We did not do so for ideological reasons. We did so after considering the input from first responders, from those involved in prior school shootings (including letters from the survivors of Sandy Hook) and from our 181,000 members—the majority of whom do *not* support the arming of teachers.

There are many proven safety measures that do not involve the risks and dangers of adding thousands of guns to our schools. I have provided five such ideas that can make a difference and save lives. And I would ask you to focus on those actions.

**Conclusion**

In closing, I will never forget the day – April 20th, 1999 – when I heard the news of two students carrying out a mass shooting at Columbine; I was helping students at my school in Council Rock School District – the level of panic, fear – it was terrifying, and overwhelming.

And I will never forget the horrific sadness I felt in December 2012 when 20 first and second graders—just babies—were shot at Sandy Hook.

And now Parkland has happened. And I feel a renewed sense of shock. And renewed feelings of sadness. But I also feel an overwhelming desire for action.

Representatives, these tragedies aren't going to stop on their own, nor will the many more instances of violence that don't make their way to the headlines, unless we act. No student, educator, or parent should walk through the threshold of their school and have to worry about the threat of violence.

I know it is challenging to find consensus and to find the resources needed to implement those ideas. Still, I believe the proposals I have shared with you today: investing in school safety grants, providing more support for mental and emotional health, creating crisis teams designed to predict and prevent violence, protecting federal funding, and allowing localized planning can and will achieve bi-partisan support.

And yes, they will require investments. But think about the people of Florida, Connecticut, or Colorado having to look back with regret. Think of the actions they would take today to have avoided those tragedies.

Let us not look back in regret.

Let us not wait for it to be our turn before we act when we could act now.

Please, do anything and everything possible.

Please, do it today.

Thank you for considering my testimony.