

Op-ed – Dolores McCracken

**School Safety Task Force Report
September, 2018**

Following the tragic school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, I asked the educators and support professionals who belong to PSEA to send me their ideas to make our schools safer places to teach and learn. Within just one week, I received nearly 1,000 thoughtful replies from across Pennsylvania.

Many of those suggestions, which I shared with state lawmakers and Gov. Tom Wolf, were included in school safety legislation enacted this summer and reflected in the final recommendations of a task force on school safety commissioned by Gov. Wolf and Auditor General Eugene DePasquale.

The fact that elected leaders from both parties are listening to the educators who work in our schools is good news. After all, these are the professionals who best understand how our schools work and are best positioned to identify proactive steps we can take to stop the unthinkable before it happens.

The school safety law reflects a tremendous amount of progress in a short period of time.

That plan provides school districts with \$60 million in safety grants for a menu of security, training, prevention, and counseling programs. Those grants will allow school districts to identify their unique safety challenges and meet them in a cost-effective way.

The law also creates a “Safe2Say” program providing a safe and anonymous way for parents, school staff, students, and community members to report dangerous or criminal acts, threats, or instances of bullying. This is an idea that several PSEA members recommended.

I had the honor of serving on the state’s school safety task force, which held a series of six hearings across the commonwealth to hear from students, families, teachers, and other education stakeholders.

What I heard in those hearings reflected many of the nearly 1,000 school safety suggestions educators shared with me last spring. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving school safety.

We need to consider everything from student wellness to the security of school buildings to partnerships with community leaders and law enforcement. Every school district in Pennsylvania must have the resources it needs to hire staff and identify its specific, local needs.

That is a key recommendation from the task force.

The task force also heard extensively about the need to focus more on student wellness, including mental health.

This is something PSEA members strongly support. We believe that we must make student wellness a top priority by investing in more school counselors, school psychologists, social workers, school nurses, behavioral specialists, home and school visitors, and paraprofessionals.

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.

By focusing on student wellness, we can address a small problem before it becomes a big problem—potentially preventing a tragedy and helping students tackle the often-invisible challenges that prevent them from excelling academically, enjoying time with friends, or mentally preparing for a bright future.

While student wellness is a top priority, so too is the physical security of our schools. The task force report recommends employing more trained, armed professionals in schools and making building improvements to enhance school safety.

At the end of the day, our goal is to prevent tragedies in our schools before they happen.

I wish that we could have gotten to this point without the unthinkable tragedies that occurred in Parkland, Sandy Hook, and too many other schools across the nation. We continue to mourn the loss of those beautiful lives, taken much too early by senseless violence.

We also honor their memories by taking proactive steps now to make sure that tragedies like these never happen again.