

**Statement of NASP President John Kelly  
Federal School Safety Commission Public Listening Session  
Washington, DC, June 6, 2018**

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. John Kelly. I am a school psychologist and president of the National Association of School Psychologists. On behalf of NASP and our 25,000 members, I would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity to share evidence-based suggestions for how we can improve school safety and prevent violence.

NASP has played a leadership role on these issues for a long time. We are committed to working with this Administration, Congress, and other education and policy leaders to ensure that our schools and communities have the capacity to keep all students safe, support their mental and behavioral health, and foster their successful learning.

I encourage the Commission to reference our written testimony, as well as the [Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#) developed by NASP and other major education organizations represented here today.

The good news is that we actually know a lot about what really works to create safe and supportive schools. The harder news is that none of what works involves sound bite solutions, the purchase of a single program or security system, or, quite frankly, the over-hardening of our schools. Rather, real school safety requires the comprehensive, integrated, and sustained approaches outlined in the Framework.

I'd like to highlight three key factors this afternoon.

**First, addressing students' mental health needs is critical.** Doing so is central to school safety, not just from the perspective of violence prevention, but in terms of overall student well-being and learning. As a high school psychologist, I work to meet students' mental and behavioral health needs. In every instance, my ability to help these students has relied on my specific training and the fact that I am in the building and accessible to students and staff. This may seem obvious, but too many schools do not have adequate access to school psychologists, school counselors, or school social workers. Unlike our community-based mental health colleagues, school-employed mental health professionals are specifically trained to provide services within the learning context. We understand how to work with school staff to identify struggling students and incorporate interventions into the school day. I also work closely with community providers serving students who need more intensive services.

Unfortunately, the country is facing a critical shortage of school-employed mental health professionals, as well as limited mental health resources for children and youth in the community. This is bad for kids, their teachers, and their families. However, I just spent the past few days with the Boston Public Schools where they have a highly effective model for addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of students. This is led by school psychologists and social workers in partnership with the Children's Hospital and the University of Massachusetts. We'd be happy to share more about this model with the Commission.

**Second, school climate and positive relationships are the foundation of school safety.** My students trust me. They trust their teachers. They feel they can ask for help when they need it.

Students need to trust that adults are going to do the right thing if they reach out. One key component to this trust is that we balance physical and psychological safety. We employ reasonable security measures such as locked doors, controlled entry to the building, use of SRO's, and monitored hallways, but we don't try to turn our learning environment into a fortress. Importantly, arming teachers is not the answer. Doing so places an unrealistic, unreasonable burden on America's educators, and can undermine the sense of safe, supportive learning environments. Our nation must focus on approaches that genuinely safeguard the well-being of our children, as well as the school staff who work to educate, empower, and protect children every day. Putting more guns in schools is not one of those approaches.

Rather, we work hard to create a school climate in which all students feel valued, supported, and connected. Key to this is the use of effective, positive discipline strategies that focus on reinforcing positive behavior, preventing and addressing negative behavior, and keeping students in school. An over-reliance on "zero tolerance policies," suspension, and expulsion contributes to the school to prison pipeline and can put students at an increased risk of dropping out, risky behaviors, and involvement in the criminal justice system. Schools can and should address negative behavior and connect students to the necessary supports they need to be successful rather than pushing them out.

**Third, every district needs appropriately trained, multi-disciplinary school safety and crisis response teams.** Ongoing training of the teams should encompass prevention and early intervention, as well as response and recovery to prepare for critical events. This includes conducting effective lockdown drills, collaborative planning with community responders, and

training school mental health professionals with the skills and techniques to provide quality suicide risk and threat assessments, as well as interventions to support psychological recovery.

I served on the team that helped support the reopening of school in Parkland, Florida. Our presence was vital in those initial days, but it was temporary. Recovery from a traumatic crisis is a long process that requires sustained focus and mental health supports. The district's school safety and crisis team will be at the epicenter of that recovery. How the recovery process is supported over time will be integral to the district's ongoing school safety efforts.

We need to do more as a nation to address the underlying causes of violence and enact meaningful gun safety legislation that reduces inappropriate access to weapons. As the Commission develops recommendations, it is imperative that we stay focused on evidence-based efforts that we know work to prevent violence and keep our children and youth safe. We look forward to working with you toward this goal.

Thank you.

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