



**NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, January 9, 2013
UPDATE Wednesday, January 16, 2013

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NASP Cautions Against Arming School Personnel to Improve School Safety

Bethesda, MD—The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has long advocated for making school safety a priority. The tragic events at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 further bring to light the imperative for a serious national commitment to ensuring the safety of our school children and staff. However, we must guard against letting our sense of urgency obscure evidence-based school safety initiatives in favor of seemingly obvious and potentially harmful approaches, particularly those that bring more guns into schools.

Effective school safety efforts consider both physical and psychological safety and utilize evidence-based practices to ensure the well-being of all students. Reasonable building security measures, such as secure doors, lighted and monitored hallways and check in-check out systems for visitors, are important. However, an over-emphasis on extreme physical security measures alone, such as increasing armed security and/or arming school staff, will not improve school safety, and in fact may undermine the primary mission of schools to ensure learning while safeguarding our children.

First, schools remain among the safest places for children and youth. Incidents that would require deadly force in schools remain incredibly rare. Based on the U.S. Center for Disease Control's School-Associated Violent Death Study for the 2009-2010 school year, the odds of a young person ages 5 to 18 years being the victim of a homicide at school, on their way to school, or at a school-sponsored event was 1 in 2.5 million. While any student death deserves extraordinary consideration, providing armed security in each school for the sole purpose of responding to violent crises would be an inefficient use of valuable resources and personnel, and further sends a message to students that there is in fact a risk worthy of such measures even in the absence of such risk.

The cost-benefit of putting an armed security officer in every school should be carefully weighed. According to the National Association of School Resource Officers, it costs approximately \$80,000 a year, per school, to have a trained, armed school resource officer in each building. According to estimates made by Asa Hutchinson, an official with the Department of Homeland Security, and as reported by *The Washington Post*, placing an armed officer in each school across the nation will cost between \$2 and 3 billion dollars per year. School resources officers differ from other security personnel in that they are commissioned police officers who have special training to protect and serve the school environment. When properly deployed, they can be important contributors to overall school safety efforts. Because of their special training, school resource officers are the only professionals who should be armed in a school, and the decision to use such armed security should be made based on individual community and school need, not via universal mandate.

Second, the research available regarding schools that do utilize armed security generally demonstrate non-significant impacts on reducing actual violence while at the same time are associated with students reporting that they feel *less* safe. Students' perception of safety is not a trivial consideration given that simply feeling unsafe impedes learning and the ability to develop a nurturing, supportive, and welcoming school environment. In this regard, providing armed security has the potential to be more harmful than helpful to the very students we aim to protect.

Third, the presence of trained security personnel is important, especially when these professionals are considered integral members of the school community who regularly contribute to ongoing school safety efforts and to a sense of trust between students and adults. Like all school personnel, a mitigating factor of their effectiveness is the quality of interactions they maintain with students. When utilized effectively, trained security personnel can play an important role in the promotion of school safety.

Fourth, relying on armed security or school personnel with only basic training in using firearms as our frontline intervention to school violence neglects the significant training needed to respond in a violent crisis, such as confronting an armed shooter in a school building. The physiological and psychological reaction to a crisis or life-threatening experience can impede the ability to respond appropriately. Even among trained police officers, there is significant variability in who shoots in a given situation based on various predictors. In fact, a research brief from the RAND Corporation recommended that police officers should expand their regular training to include more diverse and dynamic scenarios and

decision-making exercises to improve and maintain their reflexes and judgment. Effective training with firearms must be intensive and ongoing to be effective. It is unreasonable to hold school-based personnel to these high standards, and it would be irresponsible to arm school teachers or administrators in the absence of such training.

Fifth, focusing exclusively on increasing armed security ignores the fact that efforts to safeguard students must occur long before an individual is on the premises with the intent to cause harm to others as well as themselves. School safety requires an ongoing commitment to creating a school environment where students feel welcomed and supported. Schools must allow for the development of trusting relationships among staff, students, and families where students feel connected and part of a close-knit and caring community, and in which they feel empowered to report any safety concerns. To achieve this, all school staff must commit to creating safe and supportive schools. Schools must have trained safety and crisis teams and plans that balance physical and psychological safety measures. In addition, all students must have access to school-based mental health supports that are coordinated with families and community resources.

There is widespread consensus among national school safety and violence prevention experts on what is most effective, as articulated in the [December 2012 Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement](#) released by the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence. Policy makers, educators, public safety professionals, mental health professionals, and families need to focus their collective energies on evidence-based school safety measures, not quick fix reactions that defy evidence and research.

For NASP's comprehensive school safety recommendations please see *NASP Comprehensive School Safety Recommendations* at www.nasponline.org/safetyrec2013.

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