



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
School Psychologists

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The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland
Security and Governmental Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Gary Peters
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland
Security and Governmental Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member,

Thank you for holding this important hearing to discuss the best practices for enhancing school safety against targeted violence. On behalf of the 25,000 members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), we know firsthand that schools play a critical and irreplaceable role in keeping students safe and supporting their mental health. While schools remain one of the safest places for children, we cannot ignore the fact that acts of violence do occur on our school campuses, in addition to those that our students experience on the way to and from school and in their communities. This can include bullying, harassment, fighting, assault, and gun violence. According to Every Town for Gun Safety, there have already been at least 57 incidents of gunfire on school grounds in 2019, resulting in 10 deaths (including 3 deaths by suicide) and 35 injuries. Further, data from the Naval Postgraduate School's K–12 School Shooting database shows that 2018 was the worst year on record for school shootings and gun-related incidents. *The Washington Post* reported that more than 226,000 children have been exposed to gun violence at schools since Columbine.¹ This reality in our country is completely unacceptable. Of all developed countries, the United States is the only nation that continues to experience gun violence on a daily and pervasive basis in our schools and communities.

As Congress explores solutions to prevent school violence, it is imperative that we stay focused on facts and on what we know works. NASP urges Congress to focus on *comprehensive* efforts to improve school safety. Creating safe and supportive schools requires a team effort. We know that, together, we can create successful schools that prevent violence by simultaneously employing reasonable physical security measures, maintaining appropriate crisis preparedness and response teams and plans, and ensuring positive school climates in which students' academic, social–emotional, and mental and behavioral health needs are met. In all of these efforts, school psychologists play a critical role.

In 2012, NASP—in collaboration with the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of School Resource Officers, the American School Counselor Association, and School Social Work Association of America—released a *Framework for Safe and Successful Schools* (attached). This resource outlines best practice and policy recommendations that we know improve school safety. In 2018, the author organizations, along with the National PTA, released *Considerations and Action Steps* for implementing the *Framework for Safe and Successful Schools* (attached). This document builds on the recommendations outlined in the Framework and gives school leaders concrete steps they can take to improve school safety. We urge Congress to seriously consider these policy recommendations, which include the following:

- ***Schools must implement safety initiatives that balance psychological and physical safety.***

Effective school safety efforts should utilize evidence-based practices to ensure the well-being of all students in addition to their physical safety. Reasonable building measures, such as secure entrances and exits, lighted and monitored hallways, and check in-check out systems for visitors, are important. However, an overemphasis on extreme physical security measures alone, such as metal detectors and arming school staff, has either no effect or

¹Valerie Strauss, “Study: There’s no evidence that hardening schools actually works” (April 26, 2019) available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/04/16/study-theres-no-evidence-that-hardening-schools-make-kids-safer-gun-violence-actually-works/>

arguably negative effects on school safety². Such measures may, in fact, undermine student perceptions of safety and schools' ability to ensure an effective learning environment. Multiple studies have found no evidence that any pattern of visible security had beneficial effects on academic outcomes, and heavy surveillance was modestly associated with detrimental effects on academic outcomes.³ This is particularly true for low-income, inner-city schools or schools who serve racial and ethnic minority students.

We must balance physical and psychological safety by taking reasonable security measures while also engaging in a sustained district- and building-level commitment to foster a welcoming and supportive learning environment. It's especially important to note that *arming teachers is not the answer*. Doing so places an unrealistic, unreasonable burden on America's educators, has the potential to cause more harm from unintentional or inaccurate discharge of firearms, and can undermine the sense of safe, supportive learning environments. The *Heller v. District of Columbia* case reinforced that there are "sensitive spaces" where gun prohibition is perfectly acceptable—including schools. Our nation must focus on the approaches that genuinely safeguard the well-being of our children and of the school staff who work to educate, empower, and protect them every day. Allowing anyone other than a commissioned law enforcement officer to carry a gun at a school is not one of these approaches.

- ***Increase access to comprehensive mental and behavioral health services and supports in schools.***

Only a fraction of youth in need of mental health services actually receive them, and among those that do, the majority receive care in school. Schools are an ideal place both to promote mental wellness and to identify and support students struggling with mental health issues. In these cases, collaboration among school staff members, community members, students, and their families is essential to ensuring that children receive care and effective interventions.

We must stress that the majority of people with mental illness are not violent; in fact, individuals with mental illness are more likely to be *victims* of violence. To conclude that the presence of an issue like depression predisposes someone to commit a violent crime perpetuates an incorrect stereotype and maintains a stigma that often creates a reluctance to seek treatment. Instead we must reduce stigma, improve access to mental health services in schools, and continue efforts to build strong relationships and connections at school. These are critical factors in preventing harm and interrupting individuals' pathways toward violence. These efforts also allow for effective responses to violent acts directed at schools, and providing effective crisis response following exposure to trauma.

Importantly, in order to more effectively meet the mental, behavioral, and social-emotional health needs of students—to address the needs of the *whole* child—we must increase the number of school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers. There is currently a critical shortage of these professionals, who are trained to guide school-wide prevention and intervention, provide direct services to students in need of support, help teachers and other school staff understand the warning signs that individuals may be at risk of causing harm to themselves or others, provide appropriate threat and suicide assessments and supports to identified students, and provide crisis response and recovery mental health supports.

- ***Create welcoming, supportive learning environments.***

Students need to feel connected and included in their school communities. It is critical to enhance school connectedness and trust between students and adults, as well as to reinforce open communication and the importance of reporting concerns about someone potentially hurting themselves or others. A key component of a welcoming and supportive environment is the use of effective, positive discipline strategies that focus on reinforcing positive behavior, preventing and addressing negative behavior, and keeping students in school rather than pushing them out. Overly punitive discipline strategies, like zero-tolerance policies, do not improve school safety. Overreliance on suspension and expulsion contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. Furthermore, students who are suspended or expelled are at increased risk of dropping out, substance abuse, and other risky

² Addington, L., *The Use of Visible Security Measures in Public Schools: A Review to Summarize Current Literature and Guide Future Research* (2018).

³ Fisher, Benjamin W. & Tanner-Smith, Emily E., *Visible Security Measures and Student Academic Performance, Attendance, and Postsecondary Aspirations* (2016).

behaviors that could lead to involvement in the criminal justice system. Schools can and should address negative behavior and connect students to the necessary supports needed to be successful, rather than pushing them out.

- ***Establish trained school safety and crisis teams.***

Schools and districts need trained school safety and crisis teams and plans that are consistently reviewed and practiced. Training should encompass ongoing prevention and early intervention as well as response and recovery in the event the unpreventable occurs. This includes conducting effective lockdown drills, collaborative planning with community responders, and training school mental health professionals with skills and techniques to support psychological recovery. A primary goal should be to reinforce learning as well as safety.

- ***Enact and uphold gun laws that prevent access to firearms by those who have the potential to cause harm to themselves or others.***

NASP supports measures that will reduce access to firearms by individuals who intend to harm themselves or others and are in line with existing public safety measures designed to protect American citizens. This includes eliminating inappropriate youth access to guns; reinstating the federal assault weapons ban; keeping guns out of the hands of individuals deemed at risk of hurting themselves and others; improving awareness of safe gun practices, including secure storage of firearms; and funding public health research on gun violence. *We will not solve the issue of school and community violence by making weapons more accessible or increasing their presence in our schools.* Instead, we must do everything we can to keep weapons out of the hands of those who intend to harm others.

The truth is that no amount of investment in physical security can guarantee absolute protection from gun violence, and while hardening schools with visible security measures initially may alleviate student and parent fears and make the community aware that schools are taking action, these measures have *not* been proven to decrease acts of violence in schools. The education sector of the market for security equipment services reached \$2.7 billion in revenue in 2017⁴—but a recent study by researchers at the University of Toledo and Ball State University found that there were no physical security practices with evidence indicating they had reduced such violence.⁵ *This is why addressing the shortage and increasing access to school-employed mental health professionals is absolutely critical to tackling this difficult issue.* These professionals provide valuable expertise on creating healthy school environments—free of bullying, harassment, and discrimination—where students are comfortable and able to get the support they need and adults are able to recognize a student in crisis.

In order to make our schools safer, we must do more to address the underlying causes of violence. This means enacting legislation that will balance physical and psychological safety, increase access to comprehensive mental and behavioral health services in schools, and uphold meaningful gun safety regulations that will reduce inappropriate access to weapons. As Congress proposes legislation to curb acts of violence in schools, it is absolutely imperative that these efforts are grounded in research and best practice. If you have any questions or would like to follow up, please contact me at kminke@naspweb.org.

Sincerely,



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⁴ “School security systems industry – US market overview” (February 26, 2018) available at <https://technology.ihc.com/600401/school-security-systems-industry-us-market-overview>

⁵ Khubchandani, Jagdish and Price, James, *School Firearm Violence Prevention Practices and Policies: Functional or Folly?* (June 2019).