

Governor's School Safety Task Force

Initial Findings

Students perform their best when they are able to learn in classrooms and school environments that are safe, supportive, and healthy. In recent years, incidents of school-based violence, including school shootings, have called into question the notion that schools are safe havens, and have demanded a more coordinated response from national, state, and local education, public health, law enforcement, emergency management, and community leaders. Since the February 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members have demanded action to keep students safer. In response, Governor Tom Wolf, joined by Auditor General Eugene DePasquale, answered those calls in March by creating the Governor's School Safety Task Force in Pennsylvania.

About the School Safety Task Force

The School Safety Task Force brought together multiple stakeholders from across Pennsylvania to discuss how to improve school safety, including:

- Students;
- Parents;
- Teachers and administrators;
- Certified school nurses and healthcare professionals;
- Government officials;
- Statewide education organizations;
- Law enforcement and public safety officials; and
- Community members

Governor Wolf and Auditor General DePasquale co-chaired the task force, with Marcus Brown, director of Pennsylvania's Office of Homeland Security, serving as the governor's designee.

The co-chairs led the six task force meetings along with five vice-chairs:

- Bonita Allen, Pennsylvania Parent Teacher Association president,
- Dr. Mark DiRocco, Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators executive director,
- Dolores McCracken, Pennsylvania State Education Association president,
- Judy Morgitan, Pennsylvania Association of School Nurses and Practitioners past president, and
- Derin Myers, Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency acting executive director.

Each vice-chair was responsible for inviting multiple participants each meeting, creating a total of over 40 community participants in each regional discussion.

Five members of the Wolf Administration also supported the work of the task force:

- Education Secretary Pedro Rivera,
- Health Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine,
- Labor and Industry Secretary Jerry Oleksiak,
- Acting Pennsylvania State Police Commissioner Lt. Colonel Robert Evanchick, and

- Human Services, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Deputy Secretary Lynn Kovich.

Task Force Meetings and Format

From April through June 2018, the School Safety Task Force hosted six meetings throughout the commonwealth. Task force meetings were held at schools in South Central, North Central, Northeast, Northwest, Southwest, and Southeast Pennsylvania. Each meeting was set up as a listening session allowing for the co-chairs, vice-chairs, and state officials to hear concerns and recommendations from school and community members. At each meeting, attendees were asked to respond to the following three questions as a guide for discussion:

- *How can we help prepare school staff, students and first responders to address and respond to mass shootings and threats?*
- *How can we strengthen efforts to address the health (both physical and mental) needs of students?*
- *How can we help ensure school buildings are secure and appropriate training is conducted for students and staff?*

In addition to the task force meetings, the governor invited the public to share their ideas and thoughts on these important topics through an online feedback form. As of June 20, 2018, the Governor's Office received 743 comments from Pennsylvanians through this survey.

Listening Observations: Common Themes

This report provides a summary of the comments and concerns heard from community members during regional roundtable discussions as well as through the online feedback form. They are organized by theme, including the Task Force's specific recommendations, and identify barriers and opportunities. Common themes include the need for Pennsylvania to:

- Improve communication and information sharing;
- Enhance social and emotional learning for students;
- Increase the number of certified school nurses and mental health professionals in schools;
- Increase access to mental health services;
- Strengthen school security;
- Build connections to the community;
- Integrate law enforcement and school police/resource officers;
- Provide guidance and information to help schools determine priorities;
- Provide more resources to schools; and
- Utilize Training

Improve Communication and Information Sharing

Lack of communication was identified as an issue at all task force meetings. Attendees spoke of a need for more and better communication in three main capacities: among stakeholders; among students, schools and communities; and among students themselves. The task force identified a number of barriers to communication, including confidentiality requirements, lack of relationships among students and adults, and a culture of peer harassment and cyberbullying, isolation and fear of reprisal. Students

consistently raised the concern of not being heard and the importance of student voices leading the safe schools conversation. Many individuals pointed toward the need to enhance existing information sharing efforts to ensure that adults are able to provide appropriate, coordinated supports for students who may be struggling, and to identify red flags before they result in more serious consequences. There is a need for information sharing efforts between schools, mental health agencies, social agencies such as county children and youth agencies, probation, and local law enforcement. Often, many of these entities are working with the same students and families, but do not communicate with one another, mostly due to stringent confidentiality laws. Students and others who participated in the meetings overwhelming called on the need to ensure students voices are at the table and that their opinion is an essential component to all conversations.

Enhance Social and Emotional Learning for Students

Task force participants called for prioritizing social and emotional learning at an early age. Participants reported that students are struggling with stress and anxiety and are often not equipped with the necessary skills to manage emotions. By teaching these skills at an early age and reinforcing those skills consistently with a comprehensive K-12 program, students will be better equipped to handle challenges throughout their lives and build resiliency that will allow them to deal with challenges in a healthy way.

Increase the Number of Physical and Mental Health Professionals in Schools

Every task force meeting included requests from multiple participants to increase the number of both professionals in schools who are able to respond to the physical and mental health needs of students. Task force participants specifically requested additional Pennsylvania certified school nurses, social workers, psychologists, and counselors in schools to help meet the health needs of all students. School personnel frequently cited low ratios of physical and mental health professionals to the student population as a barrier to students receiving necessary support and treatment. Participants and stakeholders also called for increased funding and supports from the state to ensure that all schools – including those in low-income and remote communities – are able to provide necessary services and supports to all students.

Increase Access to Mental Health Services

The most consistent concern raised throughout the listening sessions related to the growing — and often inadequately addressed — mental health needs of students. The task force called for increased access to mental health services within both schools and communities. Task force participants identified barriers to treatment including stigma, wait time after referrals, and consent. By providing screening services, early intervention and treatment programs, schools and communities can better help address students' mental health needs.

Strengthen School Security

Task force participants identified the need for a number of physical security changes within schools to keep students safe from people trying to enter schools as well as from individuals within the school environment. Students mentioned adding secure vestibules at entrances, locks on all classroom doors and metal detectors. Participants also noted the need to empower current staff to identify potential challenges and strategies to improve school climate. Both existing schools and new construction should consider designs that promote security just as they have historically considered factors such as fire safety. These recommendations were called for with the acknowledgment that additional funding and

resources would be needed from the state. However, there were also discussions that were not limited by funding including having trained community volunteers to serve as additional security monitors within schools. Students stressed the importance of security personnel being properly trained to work with children and young adults.

Build Connections to the Community

The importance of establishing connections to the community was frequently identified as part of the solution to creating safer schools. Community participants can create safety nets for students facing a number of challenges. Task force participants suggested opening communication to the community to help identify safety concerns, and utilizing the community as a necessary support system for students and as a referral source and treatment option for students with mental health needs. Participants highlighted some current best practices including “Communities in Schools” where the school district invites community agencies into the schools so students can access community services during the school day.

Integrate Law Enforcement and School Resource Officers

Across the commonwealth, task force participants emphasized the role of school resource officers within schools. Participants emphasized the need for school resource officers and local law enforcement to be properly trained to work in educational settings with students, including students of color, students with disabilities, English Learners, and other historically marginalized populations. Officers must understand child and adolescent development, be aware of bias and community norms, and know how to effectively communicate with students, parents, and community members.

Provide Actionable Guidance and Information to Help Schools Determine Priorities

Task force participants, especially school administrators and personnel, called for state agencies and in particular the Pennsylvania Department of Education, to provide guidance to school districts regarding resources, best practices, and other information that could aid in shaping decision-making at a local level. With a growing list of federal and state mandates and community and student needs, schools must decide which competing priorities receive the greatest level of time and attention. Participants also noted that many school districts – especially those that lack financial and human capital resources – often spend money on programs and initiatives that do not yield the best results because they are unaware of more cost-effective, high-quality programs and services that are already available through state and other initiatives.

Increase School Funding

Across the state, participants called for additional funding to implement school safety measures appropriate to their school’s individual needs as well as to increase access to mental health services. Participants cited the growing number of mandates and expectations placed on schools that are too often unaccompanied by the resources necessary to make those changes. Educators and administrators specifically stated that schools often know what they need to do to improve safety, foster a more inclusive and supportive school culture, and increase access to needed services, but they are often not able to make those changes due to inadequate funding.

Utilize Training

In addition to the above common themes, training was identified as a need related to many of the themes. From training for teachers and school staff in the area of social and emotional learning to

regular hands on training of students and school staff on what to do if there is an active shooter to training for school resource officers, it was clear that school staff and students would be interested in additional training.

Next Steps

This document outlines the initial findings and overall themes that the task force members heard from participants during the six regional meetings as well as individuals who submitted thoughts through the online feedback form. The themes outlined in this document will be utilized to outline specific recommendations. The next steps will be the compilation of data and the formulation of the final report. The final report will include specific recommendations for communities, parents, students, state and local government and other stakeholders. The final report will be completed this summer before the start of the 18/19 school year.