

**Testimony of Kathy Martinez-Prather, Director of
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“Engaging the Community: Perspectives on School Security”

**House Committee on Homeland Security,
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery**

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Chairman Payne, Ranking Member King, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the topic of school safety and for your leadership in making school safety a priority and a critical part of the educational agenda for all our schools across the country. I am the Director of the Texas School Safety Center (TxSSC) at Texas State University, and I am here to discuss the efforts of the TxSSC to support schools in effectively carrying out school safety mandates and best practices in Texas, the importance of prevention efforts in developing a comprehensive approach to school safety, and the impact community acts of violence have on schools.

As you are aware, every day our schools face challenges that have the potential to impede the learning process for our students. These challenges can range from human-caused acts of violence or natural disasters to more frequent safety issues that educators confront daily. The tragic events in Santa Fe, TX and Parkland, FL, and countless others that have impacted our nation’s schools continue to remind us that we have a lot of work to do and we all need to continue to work and collaborate together to ensure that our students have a safe place to learn every day.

Background of TxSSC and School Safety Mandates

The Texas School Safety Center at Texas State University, was created in 1999 following the tragic Columbine school shooting, and authorized by the Texas Legislature in 2001. The TxSSC is tasked in the Texas Education Code and the Governor’s Homeland Security Strategic Plan to serve as the clearinghouse for the dissemination of school safety and security information, including training, research, and technical assistance for K-12 school districts, community colleges, and most recently – charter schools, in Texas. The Center has a Governor appointed board of directors that represent practitioners such as teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, school-based law enforcement officers, and parents - who all provide a diverse perceptive to inform the work of the TxSSC.

As a research center, the TxSSC also engages in applied research that informs guidance for school practitioners about effective best practices in school safety. Our mission is to serve schools to create safe, secure, and healthy learning environments. Texas has approximately 1,025 school districts – that include over 9,000 individual campuses, 700 charter schools, and 50 community colleges – all serving over 5.3 million students.

Texas schools are charged with several school safety mandates that require:

- The adoption and implementation of a multi-hazard emergency operation plan
- Providing for employee training in responding to an emergency
- Conducting drills and exercises to prepare students and employees, including substitute teachers, for responding to an emergency
- Conducting an audit of their district facilities, at least once every three years, and submitting their audit data to the TxSSC
- Establishing a school safety and security committee

This last Texas Legislative Session – our state passed significant school safety legislation to further enhance the posture of safety in our Texas schools. Three of those mandates I will highlight:

- School districts, charter schools, and community colleges must submit their Multi-hazard Emergency Operations Plan for review and verification to the TxSSC – with the opportunity for the TxSSC to provide feedback and for the school district to make corrective action.
- Each school district must establish a behavioral threat assessment team to serve each campus of the district.
- A licensed architect will be a TxSSC board member to inform and prioritize the critical role that school design plays to uphold a positive and safe learning environment.

Since its inception, the TxSSC has provided training and developed resources to stakeholders such as district and campus administrators, teachers, school counselors, school board members, and school-based law enforcement in areas such as emergency operations planning, multi-hazard response protocols, drilling and exercising, the school safety and security audit process, behavioral threat assessment, development of MOUs, youth preparedness, bullying prevention, suicide prevention, and internet safety, and specialized training to school-based law enforcement - just to name a few.

Prevention and Mitigation Efforts in School Safety

On May 18, 2018, Santa Fe High School, located in Santa Fe, TX was the target of a senseless active attack taking the lives of 10 people – 8 students and 2 teachers. While the high school and school district, as well as the community continue to recover from this tragic event, the state of Texas also continues to make school safety a priority.

The TxSSC knows that schools face many threats, hazards, and vulnerabilities – and although an active attack is still rare – the impact is no doubt catastrophic. That's why we take a comprehensive approach to school safety. We provide training and develop tools/resources for

schools on how to prevent and or mitigate as well as respond to and recover from, any type of threat that could arise.

School architecture and design is one of those key mitigation strategies. To be clear, this isn't about installing cameras and metal detectors, although that may be appropriate for some schools. This is about designing schools to be learning spaces first; ones that contain minimally invasive but effective security measures. This best practice ensures that whether a building is new or existing, its physical features don't negatively impact teachers, students, or the community at-large.

The TxSSC also stresses to schools the importance of prevention efforts in the overall comprehensive approach to school safety. Modeled after the state of Virginia legislation, Texas now requires school districts to have behavioral threat assessment teams. Responding to an active shooter event or knowing what to do if an intruder enters the building are skills students, teachers and administrators unfortunately need to practice and perfect. However, we know that educators are most interested in being preventative and proactive, not reactive. After a violent event occurs in our schools, educators, parents, community members, and legislators want to know how it could have been prevented.

Research of U.S. school shootings has shown that these violent events can be prevented because the acts are typically planned in advance, the actors tell others beforehand about their violent plans, and the acts are often carried out because there is a level of desperation or the view that violence is the only option left to solve problems.

Behavioral threat assessment provides a proactive, evidence-based approach for identifying individuals who may pose a threat to self or others, intervening with appropriate resources, and ultimately improving the safety and well-being of the individual of concern, the situation, and the school.

The goal of threat assessment is not to punish a child, but to connect them with the appropriate interventions they need so a threat can be averted and that individual can be put on a path to success. Keeping our schools safe involves not just effectively responding to violent events, but working to prevent them as well. Behavioral threat assessment management is a means to do just that.

Impact of Community Violence on Schools

Community acts of violence also have a significant impact on schools. Most recently, on August 3, 2019, a gunman in El Paso, TX entered a Walmart and took the lives of 22 people, including a student from a nearby school district. Weeks later on August 31, a gunman senselessly killed 7 people throughout the Midland/Odessa community, including a student from a nearby school district. On November 5, 2017, a gunman fatally shot and killed 26 people at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX.

Although these were not school shootings, they had a significant impact on the school districts in those communities. As mentioned, two of the individuals killed were students and many others either friends or family members of those in the school district. In the aftermath of these acts of

violence, many of the school districts in these communities were also provided resources to assist with counseling for students, staff, and parents, which in some cases still continues today. It is important to understand that these acts of violence in the community also impact schools. I have spoken with several of the superintendents in these communities, who also knew I would be here today, and what is paramount throughout these discussions is the desire to engage in preventative strategies – specifically through the threat assessment process - to avert acts of violence before they ever occur, whether in our schools or in our communities.

School safety is a shared responsibility that involves school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, mental health professionals, law enforcement, architects, school safety professionals, various state agencies/organizations, parents, students, policy makers, and the entire community. By ensuring that our schools are safe and healthy learning environments, we give our children the opportunity to excel both academically and socially.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and I look forward answering any questions you may have.