



FIELD HEARING ON SCHOOL SAFETY

House Committee on Homeland Security

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

Protecting Our Future: Addressing School Security Challenges in America
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Chairman Donovan, Ranking Member Payne and other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share what we at the U.S. Department of Education are doing to help States, school districts and schools keep our children safe.

Mass violent incidents occurring in our nation's schools in recent months and years, as Secretary DeVos noted, are "devastating reminders that our nation must come together to address the underlying issues that create a culture of violence." Today, I am here to share what the Department has been doing to promote school safety and security and what we have learned about what works.

First, with the support of Congress, for several years the Department of Education has been actively supporting States and school districts in promoting school safety and security, including:

- Since 2014, funding States with the **Grants to States for School Emergency Management Program** to increase their capacity to assist districts in developing and implementing high-quality school emergency operations plans. Funding has been provided to 26 states thus far. States that have not previously received a grant under this program will receive a priority for a grant in FY '18. We expect to make 16 new awards.
- Since 2014, funding 12 States and 71 districts with **School Climate Transformation Grants** that support evidence-based behavioral practices to improve school climate and behavioral outcomes for all students, a key aspect to violence prevention.
- Since 2014, funding 22 school districts with **Project Prevent Grants** to increase their capacity to identify, assess, and serve students who have been exposed to pervasive violence; help to ensure that affected students are offered mental health services for trauma or anxiety; support conflict resolution programs; and implement other school-based violence prevention strategies that will reduce the likelihood that students will commit violent acts in the future.
- Over the past three years, funding more than 30 awards to States, school districts and institutions of higher education with **Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV)** grants to help restore the learning environment after it has been disrupted by a violent or traumatic crisis, including to support the provision of mental health services after a learning environment has been disrupted by violence or an otherwise traumatic crisis.
- Over the past eight years, funding to the **National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments** to provide technical assistance and support to States, school districts, and schools across this country in helping to provide safe and healthy school environments that prevent substance abuse, support student academic success, and prevent violence. Specifically, the Center supports States, school districts and schools in using the U.S. Department of Education School Climate Surveys, a suite of free, high-quality and adaptable school climate surveys and an associated web-based platform. The School Climate Surveys measure 5 areas of school safety that can be used to assess school safety needs.

- Since 2004, funding the **Readiness Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center**, which supports school districts, schools, and institutions of higher education across the country in preventing, protecting, mitigating, responding, recovering from emergencies, and school shootings. The REMS Technical Assistance Center has guided emergency planning and helped schools consider what technologies are available and the role of security personnel.

Second, since the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law, the Department has been planning for and actively implementing the Title IV, Part A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment program. This program is intended to improve students' academic achievement by increasing the capacity of State educational agencies, local educational agencies, and local communities to provide all students with access to a well-rounded education; improve school conditions, including school safety and security, for student learning; and improve the use of technology to improve the academic achievement and digital literacy of all students. The Department issued non-regulatory guidance on Title IV, Part A, in 2016 that addressed issues relating to improving school conditions for learning, and we are currently developing additional guidance on how States, districts, and schools can use Title IV, Part A funds to promote school safety and security.

Third, after the tragic school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, Secretary DeVos met with the school Superintendent and Principal to offer support from the Department. Deputy Secretary Mick Zais and I visited Santa Fe High School in Texas to meet with the Superintendent and Principal to do the same. After visits to Parkland and Santa Fe, the Department provided SERV Grants, in the amount of \$1 million each, to both school districts.

Soon after the Parkland shooting, the President established the Federal Commission on School Safety and appointed Secretary Betsy DeVos as Chair of the Commission. The Commission is responsible for providing meaningful and actionable recommendations to keep students safe and secure at school. By way of a series of formal meetings, listening sessions and field visits, the members of the Commission are gathering information from a long list of stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, school safety personnel, administrators, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, school counselors, security professionals, and researchers.

The Commission held an organizational meeting on March 28, 2018 and arranged a series of meetings, site visits, and listening sessions which have occurred over the last several months. Formal Commission meetings provide a forum for presentations from subject matter experts, individuals affected by school violence, and other key stakeholders. Listening sessions provide opportunities for the public to be heard and provide recommendations to the Commission. Field visits involve travel to schools and other sites to observe and learn first-hand about current best practices in school safety.

On May 17, 2018, the Commission hosted a discussion to learn from survivors and family members affected by the mass shootings at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech University, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in addition to authors of official reports following incidents of school violence.

The first field visit occurred on May 31, 2018, at Frank Hebron-Harman Elementary School in Hanover, MD. Commission members and their representatives heard from administrators, principals, teachers, students, and a national expert about Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a framework designed to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students.

On June 6, 2018, the Commission hosted a public listening session at the Department's headquarters. In total, 62 individuals shared their views on school safety. The forum was broadcasted online, and information was publicized on how members of the public can share additional comments with the Commission.

On June 21, 2018, the Commission held a formal meeting at the White House. The meeting titled, "The Ecology of Schools: Fostering a Culture of Human Flourishing and Developing Charter," featured three different panels of experts focusing on effects of entertainment, media, cyberbullying and social media on violence and student safety.

On June 26, 2018, in Lexington, Kentucky, the Commission conducted roundtable discussions with state and local officials as well as gathered information from the public on how schools, districts, institutions of higher education, and other local and State government agencies can improve school safety.

These sessions have explored evidence-based and promising approaches to school safety and security that include:

- Building the social emotional competencies of students and staff
- Developing student character
- Preventing bullying via social media
- Engaging school safety personnel in schools
- Studying the effects of violent entertainment and media coverage of mass shootings, and
- Improving school climate.

At the Commission's request, the Department is also considering a survey to all State educational agencies on how they are complying with the Unsafe School Choice Option requirement in section 8532 of ESSA, which requires that each State that receives funds under ESSA (and all States choose to do so) have a statewide policy that any student who attends a "persistently dangerous" school, or who is the victim of a violent crime while on school grounds, be allowed to attend a safe public school in the same school district. A review of States' Unsafe School Choice Option policies is necessary to ensure that State policies are consistent with the law's requirements and to identify ways that the Department can and should provide technical assistance in this area.

The information and data collected will inform the Commission's recommendations and best practices, which will be included in the final report.

Based on the best available research and experience from implementing these activities, the Department has learned that prevention is key: schools need to be prepared and provide needed student supports. For example, we have received reports from school district leaders that while

schools may have experienced a traumatic incident, the emergency planning training they received from the REMS TA Center helped prevent or lessen the trauma the school experienced had they not been prepared to respond to these incidents.

Working to improve school climate, build social emotional skills and provide access to mental health services; knowing the signs of youth violence; and being prepared with emergency protocols can help to identify and reduce safety and security risks in schools. Through the activities I have described today, we will continue to work tirelessly with our state and local school partners to ensure that children are safe and secure when they are at school.

Thank you again for providing an opportunity for us to discuss this important issue. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.