

Testimony for Public Hearing on School Safety
House Education Committee Meeting
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Good Morning Members of the House Education Committee. My name is Eloise Milligan and I have served as a principal at all levels Prek-12 for the past 14 years. Currently, I am a primary level principal (grades prek-3) at Reserve Primary School in the Shaler Area School District. We border Pittsburgh, PA. For the past 19 years, I have worked in seven districts as a teacher or principal in our State. I have served in Eastern, Western, and Southwestern PA school districts. These districts ranged from rural to urban, affluent to economically disadvantage. I bring a unique perspective on the topic of school safety because I have a diverse background and I have my Superintendent's Letter of Eligibly. My husband has taught for 19 years in The Woodland Hills School District in Western PA. I am here to say some districts are very prepared and some are not. However, all are trying to do their best to protect the students and staff.

First, please stop referring to everyone in a school system as teachers. There are many more involved in the daily operations of a school. There are administrators, clerical staff, custodians, paraprofessionals, and teachers.

Second, arming teachers is not the answer. They are the least likely to encounter an intruder. A teacher's first focus is to protect children, not leave them and go into a hallway for a gunfight. Teachers remain in their rooms most of the day. The only time they leave their classroom is for lunch, prep, and duty. Principals and custodians are throughout the building and grounds everyday and we view the security cameras. We are the first to see an intruder. I support arming principals and custodians. I am a gun owner and have a carry permit.

However, no school personnel need armed if you add funding so all districts have a police officer, not a School Resource Officer (SRO) on campus and at each building. The role of a SRO is different than that of the police. The first role of an SRO in a school is to educate students and help parents. A SRO only assists with discipline if asked by a principal for incidents that warrant police involvement. The presence of police will prevent many from following through with an extreme school incident. If each local law enforcement agency and the State Police, which

services rural districts, had the ability to assign one officer to a school for perimeter protection, the occurrence of active violent incidents would lessen. I urge you to protect school buildings as we do federal buildings. All schools need a checkpoint for entry with a police officer who scans those entering the building. We need high-level metal detectors similar to those in federal buildings. We need secured entrances; too many schools have multiple unsecured entrances. ALICE training for schools focuses on securing one's environment and evacuating, not confronting a shooter.

Third, all school staff need trained in ALICE and funding is needed to provide for this training. The Shaler Area School District trained all professional staff and this training is impactful not only for school, but life. We practice active shooter drills with all students Prek-12. My students aged 3-9 understand and execute this drill perfectly. Our drill was February 22. Throughout the year, we practice the active shooter drill, an evacuation drill, weather drill, fire drill, and lock down drill. Our School Resource Officer and local law enforcement assists in the active shooter and evacuation drills.

ALICE developed after Columbine as the first training program in the country to provide staff and students with an option-based response to an active shooter gaining entry into a school. Training can occur on site or online with demonstrations, practical scenarios, and evaluation drills. The student program is easy for children of all ages to understand. Both the adult and student program provide hands on practice. My students know ALICE means: alert, lockdown, inform, counter, evacuate. I urge members to add funding to school safety so all districts can provide ALICE training to their staff and students. This one action can save lives. If a district has an SRO trained in ALICE, the cost is minimal to a district, but not all districts have this option.

Fourth, mental health funding is needed and resources for schools. When I began as a principal, I could suspend a child who was a threat to themselves and others. I could require a parent/guardian to have their child undergo a mental health assessment prior to the child's return to school. This step saved many children. Around 2010/2011 this changed. Principals may not require a mental health assessment. We may only ask and suggest. This change has caused many children to slip into a path of self-destruction. I encounter many parents unwilling to accept their child may have a condition; therefore they do not listen to our concerns or follow through with our requests. As a principal, I see thousands of students in a school and I am aware of those who demonstrate concern. I have children at the age of five who exhibit psychopathic tendencies. These children display very

concerning behavior and thoughts. Laws need enacted that provide for school administrators in conjunction with school psychologist to require a mental health screening for children who truly exhibit frequent and consistent concerning behavior, regardless if they are a special needs student.

Fifth, video games do not cause children to become violent. Many in my age group played “violent” video games as teenagers (1983-1990). They were considered violent for the time. Neither my friends nor myself had a thought to harm others. Our parents instilled morals and values in us. We had family dinners, limited TV and video game time, and we played outdoors and had interests. Today, I encounter more children who do not have any of the above imparted upon them by their parents/guardians. Funding for all schools to have after school programs and classes for family planning is needed. Children need role models. Children need structure and routines; children need an outlet where they interact with peers and adults in a safe environment.

Finally, students need a mentor in school. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention provides research on the effectiveness of school-based mentoring programs. Mentoring allows for students to connect with an adult during a set period of time in a school day. I have worked in districts with strong school-based mentoring programs and those schools had fewer disciplinary problems compared to the districts I have worked that do not offer mentoring. Frankly, I have witnessed the union in some districts stonewall this effort. This stance is unsettling to me. As educators, you should have the notion to assist students, regardless of their background. We cannot pick and choose the students we have, but often some teachers target those students who are not considered normal in their eyes. Research shows that if a student has a strong connection to one adult in a school system, the likelihood of them having success is greater (<https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org>).

Over 19 years, I have seen a dramatic change in the decline of servicing students Prek-12 who exhibit mental health issues. My experiences are from seven different districts in our State. The points made need addressed. I appreciate your time and ask you to take action by making school safety the focus of your educational efforts. No student, parent, or school staff member should fear going to school. Many of us do.

Sincerely,
Eloise Milligan
Principal, Shaler Area School District