

Testimony Before the Senate Majority Policy Committee

Crime Trends and Solutions in Pennsylvania Schools

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Chairman Argall, Chairman Rowe, Representative Watro, members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee and House Republican Policy Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding crime trends, school safety, and strategies to protect the students and staff of Pennsylvania's public schools.

My name is Daniel J. Gentile, Jr., and I serve as the Chief of Police and Director of Security for the Hazleton Area School District. Every day, our officers and security personnel are entrusted with protecting thousands of students, educators, and visitors across multiple school buildings.

When we discuss crime, we often focus on incidents after they occur. In schools, however, our greatest success comes from prevention. Every fight that does not happen, every weapon that never enters a school, every student who receives intervention before turning to violence, represents a victory for public safety.

Today's challenges extend beyond school walls. We are seeing the effects of community violence, social media conflicts, mental health concerns, substance abuse, and emerging threats carried into educational environments. Students do not leave these issues at the door when they arrive at school. As a result, school safety and community safety are inseparable.

I am pleased to report that over the past three years, our district has experienced a significant decrease in violent incidents occurring on school property. Through a combination of proactive policing, enhanced security practices, threat assessment procedures, mental health intervention, and strong partnerships with local law enforcement, we have reduced serious assaults, fights resulting in injury, weapons-related incidents, and other violent behaviors that negatively impact the learning environment.

This decline did not happen by accident. It is the result of a coordinated strategy that focuses on prevention rather than reaction.

First, we have strengthened our threat assessment process. Students today often communicate concerns, grievances, and even threats through social media and electronic communications long before an act of violence occurs. By training staff members to recognize warning signs and establishing clear reporting mechanisms, we are able to intervene before a situation escalates.

Second, we have expanded collaboration between school personnel, law enforcement, behavioral health professionals, and families. Many of the challenges we face are not simply criminal justice issues. They involve trauma, mental health concerns, substance abuse, family instability, and online influences that affect student behavior. Addressing these factors early helps prevent future criminal activity while keeping young people connected to school and community supports.

Third, we have invested in physical security measures including access control systems, visitor management procedures, surveillance technology, emergency communications, and specialized school police and security training. These measures create safer learning environments while allowing our staff to focus on education.

While these efforts have produced positive results, significant challenges remain.

One of the fastest-growing concerns we face is the impact of social media and technology on school safety. Conflicts that once ended when students left school now continue twenty-four hours a day through online platforms. Threats, harassment, intimidation, and the rapid spread of misinformation can quickly create fear and disruption throughout an entire school community.

We are also seeing increased demands related to behavioral and mental health crises. School police officers today are expected to serve not only as law enforcement professionals but also as crisis responders, mediators, and partners in intervention efforts. The complexity of these situations requires ongoing training and resources.

As lawmakers consider ways to further improve school safety across Pennsylvania, I respectfully offer several recommendations for legislative consideration.

First, continue and expand dedicated funding for school security personnel and technology. Many districts face financial constraints that make it difficult to maintain modern security infrastructure, conduct regular training, and employ qualified school police officers. Stable, recurring funding would allow districts to plan for long-term safety improvements rather than relying on intermittent grant opportunities.

Second, increase support for school-based mental health services. The most effective crime prevention strategy is often early intervention. Additional funding for counselors, social workers, psychologists, and behavioral health programs can help identify and address issues before they develop into disciplinary or criminal matters.

Third, establish additional grant opportunities for threat assessment training and behavioral threat management programs. Standardized training across Pennsylvania would help schools identify risks consistently and share best practices.

Fourth, strengthen information-sharing capabilities among schools, law enforcement agencies, and authorized mental health providers while maintaining appropriate privacy protections. Timely communication is often the difference between prevention and response.

Fifth, provide additional resources for combating cyber threats, online harassment, and social media-facilitated violence. Schools need access to training, technology, and investigative support to address conduct that increasingly originates online but impacts safety inside school buildings.

Finally, I encourage continued support for School Police Officer programs throughout the Commonwealth. These officers serve as a critical bridge between education and public safety, building positive relationships with students while providing professional law enforcement services when needed.

Members of the committee, every student deserves to learn in a safe environment. Every teacher deserves to work in a secure classroom. While no security strategy can eliminate every risk, we have demonstrated that strong partnerships, early intervention, and targeted investments can reduce violence and improve outcomes for our young people.

The progress we have seen over the past three years should encourage us. Violent incidents have declined, relationships between schools and law enforcement have strengthened, and prevention efforts are producing measurable results. With continued legislative support, we can build upon that success and create even safer schools throughout Pennsylvania.

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

Respectfully submitted,

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