

New York State Educational Conference Board



Student and staff safety among top concerns in today's schools *Multi-pronged approaches necessary to improve educational environments*

The New York State Educational Conference Board (ECB)—a collaboration of six leading educational organizations representing parents, classroom teachers, school-related professionals, school leaders, superintendents and school boards—calls on policymakers to support efforts to improve learning environments and make schools safer places for children to learn and grow. The process has started, but needs continued support.

Background

Mass casualty events over the last few years add an even greater sense of urgency to efforts to ensure schools are safe. And not surprisingly, parents, in particular, are concerned. According to the 2018 PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools:

- Just 27% of parents with children in kindergarten through grade 12 indicated strong confidence that their school could deter a school shooting. Thirty-one percent said they were not so or not at all confident.
- Thirty-four percent of K-12 parents feared for their child's physical safety at school—a significant increase from the 2013 results of 12%.
- More than three-quarters of those surveyed also endorsed mental health screenings for all students.

Schools are responding

School leaders across New York and the nation are responding to the concerns about school safety. Consider these results from a recent survey administered to school leaders by the New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS):

- Nearly 90% of superintendents responding to the survey said their districts had done at least one thing to improve school security in the previous six months and 65% said they had done three or more things.
- A full 89% indicated they had taken at least one action to improve security in the six months following the shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland,

School Safety Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Create funding streams to strengthen school safety and improve school climate.

- The funding streams should: (1) be allocated by formula, rather than as competitive grants and (2) be flexible, allowing districts to choose security enhancements (e.g., purchase technology, employ school resource officers) and/or activities that improve school climate (e.g., mental health programs, restorative practices, etc.) based on individual needs.
- Explore options to create shared security services through BOCES and provide commensurate support for non-component school districts.
- Allow building aid to be used to fund space for school-based health and mental health clinics.

Recommendation 2: Remove barriers impeding districts' ability to hire experienced security personnel.

- Raise the \$30,000 salary cap for retired police officers working as school resource officers (SROs).
- Remove the annual waiver requirement applied to retired police officers who earn more than the \$30,000 salary cap when re-entering the workforce as SROs.

Recommendation 3: Expedite processing of all Smart Schools Bond Act applications.

- Eliminate the significant backlog in reviewing applications, which exacerbates safety concerns for districts using Smart Schools funding for safety equipment and upgrades.

Recommendation 4: Allow districts to decline their schools' designation as polling locations.

- Opening schools as polling locations reduces student and staff safety.

Recommendation 5: Change the minimum mileage requirements for transportation aid in high-crime areas.

- Reduce or eliminate the minimum mileage requirements related to transportation aid in urban areas where student safety is a concern so pupils are provided with transportation to and from school.

Florida (with 64% taking three or more actions). Ninety-seven percent said their districts had acted prior to the Parkland incident.

- Forty-three percent of school leaders said their districts had arranged for additional professional security personnel in the six months before the survey was administered, and 73% indicated they had at least some type of arrangement for professional security personnel to be in their schools. Poor rural districts were least likely to have any such arrangement.
- In reviewing their 2018-19 district budgets, 59% of superintendents said the budgets would have a positive impact on school security. This is especially noteworthy because it's the first time in the eight years of the survey that a majority of school leaders indicated that their district budgets would positively impact any activity.
- Many of the NYSCOSS survey results showed high levels of concern from New York's school leaders about student mental health. Nearly half said their 2018-19 district budgets would have a positive impact on mental health, indicating a commitment to student well-being and improved school climates. Additionally, when asked to rank their top three priorities for additional local funding, 56% included improving mental health services; this was the most widely cited item for the second straight year.
- One of the most poignant survey comments from a school leader was: "Every morning I wake up thinking, can we keep everyone safe today?"

The National Association of Elementary School Principals' (NAESP) report entitled *The Pre-K-8 School Leader in 2018* shows that principals have similar concerns about school safety, as well as concerns about student well-being, which can, in turn, impact overall school climate. NAESP has conducted this study every 10 years since 1928. The most recent results included the following:

- More than 75% of elementary school principals responded that school safety was of moderate to high priority, indicating a shift from the prior 2008 survey, which identified instructional program needs as a top priority.
- Student mental health issues topped the list of concerns related to pupils. More than 65% of elementary school principals described their level of concern as high to extreme. Another 25.3% indicated their level of concern for student mental health issues was moderate.

"Every morning I wake up thinking, can we keep everyone safe today?"

— School superintendent

A call to action

The Educational Conference Board urges policymakers to act to ensure educational environments are safe and supportive—not only because providing safe schools is the right thing to do, but also because research shows a direct link between success in school and the school environment in which learning takes place. Students are more likely to achieve their full potential in schools that have a positive culture and settings where they feel supported and safe. In other words, positive school climate and safe school environments are significant and necessary to meet the academic and social needs of students.

Could there be anything more important than ensuring children have safe environments to learn and grow?

ECB Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Create funding streams to strengthen school safety and improve school climate.

ECB members call for the creation of a dedicated, formula-based funding stream that school districts can use to enhance security and/or improve school climate. The funding should not be in the form of competitive grants, as this will severely limit the numbers of students, staff and families who can benefit from new initiatives.

It's vital that districts also have the ability to make local determinations on how to allocate this funding to ensure individual district needs are met. For example, some communities may feel that having school resource officers (SROs) or advanced security technology in their schools is a priority for funding.

In other districts, there may be a need to focus more on improving school climate, whether it's through offering

wraparound health services, increasing mental health activities for students or introducing restorative practices or other types of positive reinforcement initiatives. This is not to say that struggling students are more likely than any other student to become violent (in fact, research shows they're more likely to end up as victims of violence). Providing supports for *all* students and fostering a climate of respect and trust reduces the overall likelihood that violent attacks will occur in school (source: "Making Schools Safer," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, February 2018).

These supports can have positive impacts on bystander behavior, as well. A report by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education found that decisions on the part of bystanders to share knowledge of planned school violence results from students' positive emotional connection to the school and school staff members. Bystanders who did not share information related to a planned attack reported no connection to the school or a negative perception of the school climate. Developing meaningful social and emotional connections with students and creating a climate of mutual respect are essential to keeping schools safe. Pupils in the study felt connected to their school when they believed someone in the school knew them and cared for them (see study at: https://www.rems.ed.gov/docs/DOE_ByStanderStudy.pdf). To this end, school staff and administrators should be provided with training on how to properly respond to students who provide information about threatening or disturbing situations, as well as how to deal with actual threats.

The positive impacts of safety efforts could be expanded even further by exploring options to create shared security services through a BOCES CoSer process. This would provide districts with a cost-efficient option for hiring SROs/other security staff or mental health professionals, as the costs would be shared between participating districts and the individual districts could purchase only the level of service needed. In addition, commensurate dedicated funding should be provided for non-component school districts.

ECB also proposes that districts be allowed to use building aid as a funding source for opening school-based health centers and mental health clinics. Without this option, many districts will never have enough flexibility in their regular operating budgets to offer these vital wraparound services to improve school climates and support students and their families—especially with the current property tax levy cap.

Recommendation 2: Remove barriers impeding districts' ability to hire experienced security personnel.

In the current state retirement system, retirees cannot re-enter the workforce in a state-funded position and make more than \$30,000 without negatively impacting their pensions. Alternatively, an employer seeking to hire such an employee can go through a lengthy waiver process, which must be completed each year. These barriers significantly impede the ability of school districts to hire retired law enforcement professionals who bring valuable experience to school security positions, along with the specialized knowledge obtained in training for school resource officers (SROs).

To eliminate these barriers, ECB members encourage lawmakers to take the necessary steps to raise the \$30,000 salary cap for retired police officers working as SROs. ECB also supports eliminating the requirement for districts to obtain annual waivers from the earnings limit for retired police officers working as school security personnel while collecting their pensions. This would help school districts to retain retired police officers who have demonstrated aptitude for the work and who have developed rapport with students.

New York's students and their families deserve the peace of mind that these professionals can help bring to schools throughout the state.

Recommendation 3: Expedite processing of all Smart Schools Bond Act applications.

The Smart Schools Bond Act was passed in 2014 to help school districts purchase instructional technology, install new prekindergarten classrooms, replace temporary classrooms and purchase and install high-tech security features. While the initiative was welcome news to many districts, the promise of updated equipment and classrooms has yet to be fulfilled for many districts, as approvals of Smart Schools applications have been slow. A report from the Empire Center described the process as "sluggish and haphazard."

The lag time means many districts must go back and revise applications to account for updated vendor quotes. The ongoing delays negatively impact student learning and, in the

case of security equipment and upgrades, exacerbate safety concerns for students and educators.

ECB recommends providing the New York State Education Department with the supports it needs to expedite the processing of Smart Schools Bond Act applications.

Recommendation 4: Allow districts to decline their schools' designation as polling locations.

Schools are often designated as polling places because they are easily accessed by voters, ADA-compliant and have enough space available to accommodate crowds. Current laws do not allow districts to appeal their schools being designated as polling places while those operating other types of community buildings can appeal.

Opening the school doors to the public for voting offsets the safety and security protocols put in place to help ensure schools are safe places, as there is less control over access to facilities. During voting, anyone can enter voting sites unauthorized, which leaves pupils and staff vulnerable to harm.

As such, ECB calls on policymakers to take the actions necessary to allow districts to opt out of being designated as polling places if school leaders or community members are concerned about student and staff safety.

Recommendation 5: Change the minimum mileage requirements for transportation aid in high-crime urban areas.

While many safety concerns arise during the time students are in school, dangers encountered on the way to school also need to be considered.

If students don't feel safe getting to school, they're less likely to actually go to school. A recent study conducted by Johns Hopkins University researchers showed a correlation between high-crime urban areas and student absenteeism. Many students in urban school districts walk through hazardous or dangerous conditions to get to school. In some cases, parents choose schools outside their neighborhoods for safety reasons so their children can be transported to school by bus. The mileage limits for transportation aid no longer reflect the circumstances of our communities nor the needs of our students and families.

ECB members recommend reducing or eliminating the minimum mileage requirements related to transportation aid in urban areas where student safety is a concern so districts can afford to transport students to and from school.

The New York State Educational Conference Board comprises the Conference of Big 5 School Districts; New York State Council of School Superintendents; New York State PTA; New York State School Boards Association; New York State United Teachers and the School Administrators Association of New York State. For more information, visit www.nysecb.org/ or follow ECB on Twitter at twitter.com/NYSECB.