



New Jersey Association of School Administrators

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Executive Director

Statement by Dr. Richard G. Bozza to the New Jersey SAFE Task Force

Good afternoon, I am Dr. Richard Bozza, Executive Director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators. I'm here today to report on the conversations that I have had with school leaders around the state as we have spoken about school security in the wake of the tragedy that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. There are no words to describe the impact of that event. Our hearts go out to the families of the victims, most of them young children, who needlessly lost their lives that day in the shooting.

Americans, particularly parents of school-aged children, have felt more vulnerable since December 14th. If a shooting could happen in a quiet residential community like Newtown, it could happen anywhere. It's true. But it's also true that this type of attack is rare. Schools are among the safest places that kids can be.

That's an important point. Schools are safe places. Since 1992, the CDC has partnered with the Departments of Education and Justice to monitor school-associated violent deaths at the national level. They have found that less than one percent of all homicides among school-age children happen on school grounds.¹

The challenge for schools and their communities is to balance the safety of students while allowing them the freedom they need to learn. In today's schools, it is standard procedure to have locked doors, controlled access, and lockdown drills. Sandy Hook Elementary School was no exception. The school used a double-secured door. Visitors to the school must press a button to be buzzed in through the outer set of school doors to enter the building. Visitors are required to show photo identification if the office does not recognize them.

¹ http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/data_stats.html, <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/schoolviolence/SAVD.html>

The gunman didn't use the front door to get into Sandy Hook. He got in another way. Still, school leaders were able to depend upon a carefully prepared crisis plan. They acted immediately, putting not only Sandy Hook into immediate lockdown, but all of the schools in the district and in neighboring districts. Students and staff were led to a safe place. Parents were contacted and reunited with their children. There were counselors available after the fact to help process the tragedy.

It's important to note that New Jersey has been at the forefront of school security ever since the events at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999. The New Jersey Association of School Administrators conducted a School Security Conference immediately following that tragedy to bring educators and law enforcement officials together to address the then critical need to examine school security procedures. That conference had been in planning since the shooting of elementary students and a teacher by children in Arkansas in 1998. A second conference followed in 2000, and a third was conducted in 2001.

NJASA will now reinstitute a School Security Conference on March 13, 2013 to again achieve the goals of communication and enhanced preparation. That conference will feature presentations by Dr. Janet Robinson, Superintendent of the Newtown Public Schools; Edward Dickson, Director of the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security; Anthony Bland, Director of the Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning; as well as representation from local law enforcement officials.

The focus on New Jersey school security following national events was brought by elected officials, Attorneys General, County Prosecutors, Commissioners of Education, school superintendents and staff members; as well as by local citizens and parents. Agreements between law enforcement and school officials were established, modified and strengthened over the years following the Columbine tragedy.

A significant event for addressing school security was October 4, 2006, when Governor Jon S. Corzine established the School Security Task Force, and designated Richard Cañas, Director of the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness as chairperson. He named Lucille

Davy, Commissioner of the Department of Education, and Chief Justice Stuart Rabner (former New Jersey Attorney General), as co-chairs. The creation of the task force underscored the need to remain vigilant in light of several tragic and violent events that occurred in schools in other states in recent years, namely, Colorado's Columbine High School massacre in the spring of 1999, and Pennsylvania's Amish School murders during the fall of 2006.²

On October 19, 2006, the Governor announced the Strategic Actions for Violence Elimination ("SAVE") plan, a comprehensive agenda to improve school safety and safety awareness. The SAVE plan had eight major action items: 1) a greater commitment to gun safety including using New Jersey Gun Control laws as a model for the nation; 2) development of updated State Standards and Guidelines for School Security; 3) Legislative initiatives for regular school safety drills and exercises; 4) training for School Resources and D.A.R.E. Officers; 5) development of a school security web site by the Department of Education; 6) school security programs for school bus drivers; 7) routine meetings between law enforcement and school officials; and 8) development of a recognition program designating "Safe Schools".³

The New Jersey School Security Task Force submitted its initial report in September 2007. The report made recommendations in the following areas:

- Distribution of Model Policies and Attorney General Directive (Active Shooter, Bomb Threats, Lockdown, Evacuation & PIO);
- Distribution of "Companion" Model Policies for School Administrators & Teachers;
- Joint Training for County Prosecutors and County Schools Superintendents;
- Uniform State Memorandum of Agreement between Education and Law Enforcement (MOA);
- Enhanced Training for School Resource Officers;
- Teacher Training;
- Local Security Councils/Working Groups; and

² New Jersey School Security Task Force Report, September 2007.

³ Ibid.

- Regular Drills & Amendments to the NJ Fire Code.⁴

Since then, the work of the School Security Task Force has resulted in continuing and significant work to enhance the security of New Jersey schools.

As of 2010, all schools in NJ are required to conduct school security drills monthly. Schools are required to hold a minimum of two of each of the following security drills annually:

- Active shooter;
- Evacuation (non- fire);
- Bomb threat; &
- Lockdown.

Consequently, schools conduct lockdown and active shooter drills at least four times in an academic year.⁵

The minimum requirements for School Safety and Security Plans for each school district are significant. The requirements include approximately 90 items divided into 7 sections. Key requirements of School Safety and Security Plans include:

- All plans must have established and defined a district-wide planning team;
- All plans must include a master schedule for each school building;
- All plans must communicate any warning signals or commands to alert staff and students of emergency responses;
- All school buildings must have an established visitor policy/procedure;
- All plans must have protocols for master key and code distribution;
- All plans must have established and documented procedures for at least 23 rapid responses;
- Each school building must have a school administrator toolkit;
- Each classroom must have emergency response guides; and
- Each plan must outline the local protocols for recovering from a crisis (i.e. mental health services).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.state.nj.us/education/schools/security/task/audits/>

The NJ Department of Education had conducted regional trainings and provided technical assistance on implementing and clarifying the new minimum requirements. School Safety and Security Plans must be updated annually by the 3rd week in October.⁶

What happened in Newtown is an unbelievable tragedy that will likely cause all of us to be even more proactive in our approach to school security. But we need to remember that no security system is invulnerable. Schools, like homes and businesses, are subject to outside influences beyond their control.

Of course, doing nothing following this tragedy is not an option. School leaders, law enforcement, students and community members throughout the state are explaining and reinforcing existing security procedures and now evaluating what could be done to avoid a situation like this in the future. Implementing a prison-like security system is not the answer. In spite of the certainty of absolute security for children that we all would like, that is not a realistic expectation. Schools remain an open environment. We see this as students are on playgrounds, athletic fields, and walking or being bused to and from school. They remain at schools late into the evenings and on weekends in auditoriums, gymnasiums, athletic fields and classrooms. As I noted earlier, our work, and your recommendations, are challenged to balance the safety of students while allowing them the freedom they need to learn.

So, what can we recommend?

1. Reinforce the work of the School Security Task Force critical to the ongoing security of students.
2. Examine and strengthen communication protocols already established between schools and law enforcement officials.
3. Focus on technological advances that can promote communications in times of crisis.
4. Establish forums and vehicles for sharing best practices in security to local law enforcement and education personnel.

⁶ <http://www.state.nj.us/education/schools/security/req/>

5. Require that school security personnel who may be armed be placed under the direct authority of the local police chief.
6. Promote the establishment of a local tip line which can facilitate anonymous reporting and a prompt response to potential trouble.
7. Examine ways in which community mental health services can be strengthened;
8. Examine how citizens can address and mitigate the culture of violence that permeates our culture.
9. Limit access to assault weapons and large capacity magazines.

Of course, school leaders will continue their work with staff, parents and community leaders to establish school climates that promote respect. Our challenges, however, require that a greater coalition of individuals, groups and institutions be brought together to succeed in limiting the threats of violence that our youth face not just in the schools, but on the streets they walk and the neighborhoods they live in.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you and the New Jersey Association of School Administrators stands ready to support your efforts.