

School Safety and Security Sub-Committee Final Report

According to the most recent 2022 Gallup Poll regarding America's Public Schools, adults and public school parents agree that measures to enhance school safety, security, and mental health are of utmost importance. In the aftermath of the May 24, 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, Americans expressed broad, continued support for enhancements to school security measures. Specifically, 80% of poll takers support placing armed police officers on duty when classes are in session and screening all students for mental health problems; and, as many as 78%, express support for placing metal detectors at all school entrances. That said, data from the same poll indicates that poll takers do not favor teachers and staff arming themselves to enhance security within schools. In fact, support falls to 45% of arming staff, with a noteworthy 55% in opposition of such measures.

This report is one of many that informs the need for further, equitable enhancements of school security and mental health supports. In New Jersey, the threat of targeted violence within public schools remains a real, yet ominous concern for school district leaders. Data from the 2022 Gallup Poll helps to inform the need for school district leaders to have critical training on school safety and security as well as resources to address security needs and deficiencies. As a result, the NJASA School Safety and Security Subcommittee has solicited input from school leaders in the State of New Jersey about their district's current security and mental health resources for purposes of identifying priority needs and systemic inequities.

Data collected from school leaders was then compiled and used to inform recommendations to NJASA for the enhancement of school safety and security in New Jersey public schools. Admittedly, while no amount of preparedness can ever eliminate the threat of school violence entirely, there are a number of actions that can potentially further mitigate incidents of school violence.

This report shall serve as a footprint from which NJASA can coordinate resources, training, and legislative advocacy with the overarching goal of further securing all New Jersey Public Schools.

Key Findings and Implications

- School districts have disparate access to specific school security measures across New Jersey.
- The vast majority of Chief School Administrators and Superintendents cited safety and security as their most pressing priority in regards to training.
- A more comprehensive and exhaustive guide is needed to replace the 2015 school security task force report.
- Legislative support for school safety and security infrastructure and personnel upgrades is needed.

Committee Recommendations

- Work in conjunction with the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) and state legislators to conduct a deeper analysis to understand the root causes of wide ranging disparities regarding the employment of armed and other security personnel in schools. Targeted advocacy should be pursued regarding a number of security needs for explicit funding for personnel, tools and additional protective security measures.
- Identify pooled/shared services amongst districts, particularly smaller and more rural areas. This should be spearheaded at the county level.
- Lobby for targeted funds to increase armed and other protection (web enabled etc.) made available from the state legislature. A statewide bond or other measure might be appropriately placed on the November ballot.
- Include annual training within the framework of NJASA's Professional Development planning. This training may include a large-scale session that could incorporate experts from Law Enforcement and the Department of Education at either the Spring Conference or during the start of the school year. This training may also include periodic one day seminars using relevant case studies from the field. The New Superintendent should be updated to reflect mandated school safety and security training for all new superintendents.
- Annual safety and security training should be demonstrations of the most recent tools utilized by districts to promote safety, e.g. web enabled systems, human resource deployment, and effective shared service models.
- Mental health funding should be expanded for local districts that can exemplify effective practices. For instance, recovery high schools, alternative schools operated within districts, mental health clinical support models. The Youth Based Programs are limited to a fraction for the total districts in NJ. Efforts to lobby/advocate for a more comprehensive state-wide approach to student mental health needs that recognizes local expertise and effective programs and assists in the financial support of such models should be pursued by NJASA and in conjunction with other educational entities.
- Utilize county affiliates to share resources related to mental health services, safety and security best practices and other shared resources. Affiliate sub-committees at the county level can implement, grow and help maintain an infrastructure for NJASA. The county expectations can effectively be established through the NJASA Executive Committee and dispersed statewide.
- Update the NJDOE 2015 school security task force report. This document was pulled together quickly and did not fully represent voices from those in the field. The document was largely a political creation and lacked involvement from a number of major organizations, including NJASA. Request that the NJDOE bring together a committee of safety and security experts as well as school leaders to update this report to more accurately reflect the current landscape in schools as it relates to safety and security.
- There was noted appreciation for New Jersey's stringent gun laws in promoting a safer environment for schools. There was general agreement that legislative action limiting gun access has had a positive impact on overall school security in NJ. These laws should continue to be supported.