


House Select Committee

July 15, 2013

Committee(s):	House Select Committee on School Safety
Audio:	 (click here)
Meeting type:	House Resolution 53 on school safety
Subject:	House Resolution 53 on school safety
Bills discussed:	HR 53 , House Bill 936 , House Bill 937 , Senate Bill 10
Keyword(s):	school safety, House Resolution 53, education, crime
Testimony:	John "Ski" Sygielski , President, Harrisburg Area Community College Michele Twersky , Pennsylvania Associate Regional Director, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America David Hegedus , Associate Director, Association of Christian Schools International Christopher Budano , Assistant Director of Education Services, Pennsylvania State Education Association Sallie Lynagh , Children's Advocate, Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania Eugene DePasquale , Auditor General
Members Present:	Chairman Gary Day (R-Lehigh), Vice Chairman Cherelle Parker (D-Philadelphia), Rep. Mike Regan (R-York), Rep. Jim Christiana (R-Beaver), Rep. Patty Kim (D-Dauphin), Rep. Marcy Toepel (R-Montgomery) Rep. Michael O'Brien (D-Philadelphia), Rep. Michelle Brownlee (D-Philadelphia), Rep. Patrick Harkins (D-Erie), Rep. Dom Costa (D-Allegheny)

 [HR 53 Day, Gary](#) - (PN 741) Resolution establishing a select committee to investigate and make recommendations concerning safety and security in public and nonpublic schools and institutions of higher education. (Prior Printer Number: 434)

The committee held a public hearing on school safety pursuant to House Resolution 53.

Chairman Gary Day (R-Lehigh) stated the goal of the committee is to provide a narrow look around school safety and have a safe school environment for Pennsylvania schools.

Vice Chairman Cherelle Parker (D-Philadelphia) commented holding the hearings have been an "educational process" for her.

[John "Ski" Sygielski](#), President, Harrisburg Area Community College, testified along with Ed Dominguez, interim director of HACC's public safety department, regarding how HACC has prepared for emergency situations and the initiatives the college and branch campuses have taken to review emergency procedures and other safety plans. Sygielski referenced the two abductions at HACC main campus and commented on how the college handled the incidents and have prepared to make sure the college is prepared in case of another occurrence. Sygielski remarked on the steps and strategies taken by the college. Sygielski remarked "the community colleges have supported legislation to provide community college campus safety with the same police powers and accesses to criminal history information as have the university police currently," he stated noting the legislation [House Bill 936](#) and [House Bill 937](#), which allows for this initiative.

Chairman Day asked if Dominguez would be considered chief of police on campus and Dominguez replied yes. Chairman Day stated he is concerned with fractional offices. He stated from a policy standpoint he thinks splitting the police force would be something he would have to take further consideration.

Rep. Parker asked Dominguez to describe the services for victims of campus-based incidents. Dominguez stated the department reaches out to student services, and if there is an immediate concern the department will be called again. Sygielski clarified the student services department offers counseling services. Rep. Parker asked about HACC's weapons policy and if it varies among other campuses or community colleges in the Commonwealth. Sygielski replied only two colleges have a policy in place regarding weapons to his knowledge.

Rep. Mike Regan (R-York) asked for an explanation of active shooter training. Dominguez stated the first step was to increase the current officers training on active shooter exercises from all of the HACC campuses. Dominguez remarked the staff and faculty were introduced to an education program to help them learn what to do. He stated the last stage would be to implement an exercise with students, staff, faculty and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) individuals. Rep. Regan asked what the online videos provide. Dominguez stated the "Run, Hide, Fight" video from Department of Homeland Security is offered online for students and faculty to watch. Dominguez added an additional video is online from HACC showing the differences and building structures from the multiple campuses. Rep. Regan said he is concerned the videos will give information to others that may be used against the campuses in an attack. Dominguez replied during the training course for how to respond those emergency situations the classes are closed and no statements are given out about how the campus police will respond. Sygielski said Rep. Regan's concern about the videos was part of the initial discussion but it was decided the help and assistance the videos could provide in prevention efforts outweighed the concern.

Rep. Regan asked who the individuals that make up the safety committee are, and Sygielski replied students, faculty, and safety personnel.

Rep. Michael O'Brien (D-Philadelphia) asked how the college identifies a student who may look "close to the edge." Sygielski said the college has worked with faculty in faculty senate who are instructed to contact their dean who contacts the head of the counseling department. The counseling advisor and the faculty member who was concerned about the will monitor the student. If an action is seen as going too far by the student a sit-down counseling session will be called, Sygielski explained. Dominguez added a faculty member can report a student who they may believe is in need of help, regardless of how minor the concern may seem, and a follow up is conducted. Rep. O'Brien asked how long the process takes and Sygielski said anywhere from a half hour to a complete day.

Rep. Michelle Brownlee (D-Philadelphia) asked if House Bill 936 and House Bill 937 were enacted into law how would the college's procedures change. Dominguez replied the active shooter demonstrations last about 10 minutes. He added with the bills in place they would use the extra manpower to respond to a real situation more quickly and effectively. Rep. Brownlee asked how much of the budget is dedicated to campus safety. Sygielski replied on a \$180 million budget he would say about one percent.

[Michele Twersky](#), Pennsylvania Association Regional Political Director, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America testified on the safety concerns from Jewish Day schools across the Commonwealth. Twersky remarked on anti-Semitic instances that occur at the schools including but not limited to physical assaults, threats of violence and verbal and written taunts. Twersky recommended the committee "includes in its recommendations a statement that schools require ongoing, consistent funding to support a safe and secure learning environment and that the funding may be used for various needs, including improving school building security, planning, training or personnel." She added the recommendations include flexibility for schools because each school has different needs and priorities.

[David Hegedus](#), Associate Director, Association of Christian Schools International, testified on safety and security accreditation standards of the ACSI schools. Hegedus commented his remarks are "to underscore the central idea that safety and security is an important issue for students in both the public and non-public schools." He recommended helping increase standards of safety schools, public and non-public, by allocating funding to support security equipment expenses, creating greater access to state-funded training programs on safety and security, mandating local law enforcement engage schools with creating emergency plans, among others.

Chairman Day asked Twersky if she could elaborate on how the Jewish Day schools are preparing for school safety. Twersky stated the schools are doing as much as possible depending on how much funding the schools have available to do so. Twersky stated some schools have security guards, locked classrooms and emergency plans. She noted not all schools are doing the same things.

Chairman Day asked if any schools bring in a local police officer to act as the security officer. Twersky replied many of the schools use security companies and the school is responsible for the training and creating of safety plans. Chairman Day asked about internal concerns of the Jewish Day Schools. Twersky stated most of the anti-Semitic remarks do not come from students within the schools. She stated normal behavior occurs, and the schools are equipped with counselors just as other schools.

Rep. Parker asked Hegedus if the ACSI schools have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with local law enforcement in their region. She questioned if this idea is only something done in public schools and not private schools. Hegedus replied the schools are held accountable by ACSI to have plans developed which include coordination with local law enforcement. He stated the other schools who are not accredited may not have the MOU.

Rep. Parker asked if there are any weapons policies in the schools. Twersky stated each school is different noting some have armed guards. She said it is a "school-by-school" policy. Hegedus stated his schools have a policy guide which states the acceptability or non-acceptability of weapons. He stated he thinks "very few if any" would have a policy with an armed security guard because it would not be financially possible.

Rep. Parker asked how a school applies to the Federal Urban Area Security Initiative Grant. Twersky stated it comes through Homeland Security and any school or other organization can apply for the grant.

Rep. Marcy Toepel (R-Montgomery) questioned if there are any problems with any schools and their relationship with local law enforcement. Twersky stated her schools have a good relationship with local law enforcement. Hegedus stated to his knowledge the relationships between the local law enforcement and schools are positive.

Rep. Patrick Harkins (D-Erie) questioned if the internet and social media have been considered when it comes to safety. Rep. Harkins commented on his daughter's experience with cyber bullying over the internet and social media. Hegedus replied the accredited schools usually have the technologically policies in place to address the social media safety and bullying issues. He added some schools, mainly non-accredited through the organization, have a challenge with handling technology in that way because of costs. Hegedus stated as servicing organization it has addressed the issue of bullying with policies. He stated it is up to the schools that are not-accredited that has to come up with their policies because the schools under ACSI are held accountable to make sure a policy is in place.

Rep. Regan commented on the challenge of local control where a parent may have a student in one district with safety policies and another parent may have a child in another district where the safety policies are not as sufficient. Rep. Regan asked who develops the plan and who is required to make the school security plans. Hegedus stated a staff member at the school will be appointed to be the head of safety and security and have to develop a team. The individual would be responsible to seek the training for him or herself and the committee, create a plan and help to oversee implementation, Hegedus replied.

Rep. Regan commented he hopes ACSI one day will add in its accreditation that a safety plan for the school will be created with help from local law enforcement. Twersky added schools recognize it may be a problem for a teacher to create a safety plan, but the school does not always have the funds to seek help. Hegedus commented school districts do try to reach out to other districts that may be able to help.

Rep. Patty Kim (D-Dauphin) commented on the issue of cyber-bullying. Rep. Kim stated in the main high school in her district, 90 percent of fights begin from Facebook. Rep. Kim commented monitoring of

Facebook may help to prevent some of the cyber bullying instances before they are brought to the schools, noting it may be a little intrusive.

[Christopher Budano](#), Assistant Director of Education Services, Pennsylvania State Education Association, referenced a report from PSEA, "Solutions that Work," which provides a plan for Pennsylvania schools. "In the area of school safety, 'Solutions that Work' affirms the need for a multi-pronged, sustainable approach to ensuring safe learning environments for students and educators on an ongoing basis and not just in the aftermath of the last tragedy," Budano remarked. The strategies include providing greater access to mental health services, providing greater coordination among schools, law enforcement and social service agencies, improving bullying prevention and creating quality alternative placements for disruptive and potentially violent students.

Chairman Day asked if he can elaborate on the Pennsylvania Positive Behavior Supports program. He stated many of Budano's recommendations would be costly for implementation. Budano replied the program is about changing the climate of the school to make it more positive, for example, training professional staff to help students with things like raising their self-esteem and see school as a positive place, Budano remarked.

Rep. Parker asked for a copy of the recommendations for solutions. Rep. Parker remarked she wanted to make sure the individuals at the schools with act as public safety personnel are "skilled and experienced" individuals.

Rep. Parker commented on her agreement with the suggestion for an anonymous suggestion box or hotline to report cases of bullying. She stated the next step is to determine what to do with the report of a bullying instance by a person who puts that information in the box

Rep. Jim Christiana (R-Beaver) questioned regarding external threats to the students. He asked if the schools are safe in the Commonwealth from external threats based on the facility structure. Budano stated he thinks it is different from school to school and school district to school district. Budano said working with the local law enforcement and the safety team at the school can help each school determine how safe the school and area around the school is regarding danger.

Rep. Christiana asked how the funds for increased staff and training would come about. Budano stated increasing the School Safety grants may help. He stated the schools may be able to work within the resources that are available but there are also ways where other funds may be needed. He added usually when funds are needed by schools the counselors and other social services personnel are usually the first to be looked at to be downsized.

Rep. Christiana questioned why the President of PSEA would be against the Passport for Learning program. Elizabeth Zamponga, PSEA Assistant Director of Government Relations, replied the organization believes the programs are "critically important" and the state should not have a one-time commitment and funds should be given on a more frequent basis. She commented PSEA wants to work to help accomplish goals.

Rep. Regan commended Rep. Parker and Chairman Day for including mental health issues in the discussion of school safety. Rep. Regan asked for further details on how to create environments for students with violent tendencies. Budano said there are multiple ways to have alternative placements that carry different costs depending on the specific service. Budano stated once a student has gone through the services and have been reviewed by the professionals on their stability the student has the potential to return to the regular classroom environment. Rep. Regan commented he believes there should be deeper intervention for a student who may once have had a violent thought about killing a classmate. Budano replied there are different levels to the placement that help based on the severity of the situation. He stated it is a "multi-level" approach depending on the specific needs of the student and the situation.

[Sallie Lynagh](#), Children's Advocate, Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania, testified on the affect of placing police officers into schools with children with disabilities. Lynagh contended many students with disabilities are being labeled as high-risk or behavioral challenged students because the police officers in schools are not equipped with enough training to deal with those types of students. "Children with disabilities are particular vulnerable to the escalating intertwine and blurred boundaries between school discipline procedures and those of law enforcement and justice systems," Lynagh remarked while providing examples of cases with students. Lynagh provided four recommendations to the committee including expanding the availability of School Wide Positive Behavior Supports in Pennsylvania schools, requiring specialized training of school resource officers, requiring the Department of Education and the Department of Public Welfare to enter in a MOU regarding behavioral health services and requiring the Office of Safe Schools to analyze data on referrals from students with disabilities.

Chairman Day asked if Lynagh would support a recommendation that the reports include a notification that the data comes from a child with disabilities or if she would deem that to be discriminatory. Lynagh said when the reports are published it already collects the data from the number of students with IEPs, but it does not collect additional data about the students. Lynagh stated every student with an IEP has a disability but not every student with a disability has an IEP. She noted the different disabilities students may have may not come with a learning need.

Rep. Parker commented the Disability Rights Network should be kept in mind when dealing with issues such as school safety. Rep. Parker commented on the third recommendation from DRN. Lynagh replied SWPBS is evidence based that is implemented in a universal way so all students receive the same message regarding rules and warnings. Lynagh provided an example set by one school where the notion of "Be responsible, Be respectful, Be ready" is reiterated to the students and staff. The students are being positively rewarded for positive behavior instead of focusing on the students who are not and reprimanding them. A report is conducted and examined to examine the students who are not receptive to the behavior and different techniques for helping the student to become engaged are looked at. Lynagh commented students who are removed from traditional schooling lose out on many of the in-class and out of class experiences.

Rep. Parker commented she has been an advocate for mainstreaming students with disabilities with other students. Rep. Parker asked when the determination is made that a child cannot take part in mainstreaming if they may have violent thoughts or tendencies. Lynagh stated one of the first questions asked is if the child will demonstrate behaviors that may become detrimental to him or herself or others. She stated there is a process that assesses the events and helps determine the best environment for the specific child.

Rep. Regan questioned if an outside intruder comes into the school with the intent to do harm if it is better or worse to have a police officer in school. Lynagh said in that situation it is better, but on other days the officer should have training to handle other situations students face on a day-to-day school basis. Lynagh remarked one thing everyone has to remember is the "unintended consequences" from the presence of a police officer.

Lynagh said the law allows a student with a disability to be removed for a drug violation or other serious violation. She stated in her experience alternative placements are recommended by many parents and teachers and most agree with the alternative placement for the student.

[Eugene DePasquale](#), Auditor General, testified on the steps his office is taking to help with the accountability of schools to perform emergency preparedness drills and update their emergency preparedness plans. Gen. DePasquale contended there are many schools that have not updated emergency plans, spoken with local law enforcement or conducted emergency drills. He referenced [Senate Bill 10](#) which provides funding to schools to help establish an update emergency preparedness plans. Gen. DePasquale noted the findings of the initial safe school reviews conducted by his office. He stated the three major areas of concern the audits found were planning, training and physical safety, and a common finding was emergency plans that are incomplete, underdeveloped and untested.

Chairman Day commented on Gen. DePasquale's testimony on what the Office of the Auditor General can do to help with the school safety issues. Rep. Regan opined he appreciates Gen. DePasquale's "real-world" approach to the situation. Gen. DePasquale stated he knows there are only so many financial resources. He added the more collaboration between organizations can help offset some costs.

Rep. Kim asked if he could let the legislature know which schools are not implementing the plans. She asked what the consequences are for those who do that comply. Gen. DePasquale said he can provide the information. He stated there needs to be a balance in letting the schools, parents and legislators know without publically putting the school out there. He stated he knows it is not easy and some school districts face more challenged than other noting a threat can happen at any school.

Chairman Day and Rep. Parker encouraged anyone with additional testimony on school safety to submit the information to the committee as soon as possible before the committee begins to develop its recommendations.

Written Testimony was submitted by:

- [Pennsylvania Sheriffs' Association](#)