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U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“Examining State and Federal Recommendations for Enhancing School Safety Against
Targeted Violence.”
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I. Introduction

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, and members of the Committee, thank you for holding this important hearing to identify effective ways to keep students safe in school. My name is Deborah Temkin, and I am the senior director of education research at Child Trends, the nation’s leading nonprofit research institute dedicated to improving outcomes for children, youth, and their families. For 40 years, Child Trends’ research has served as a resource to officeholders of both parties. Our education team focuses on identifying the policies, practices, and structures that create positive and equitable conditions for learning so that all students can thrive throughout their education and beyond. It is through that lens that I am grateful and humbled to be here today.

I cannot imagine the pain and trauma of losing a child or surviving a school shooting. As a parent, and as someone who studies schools on a daily basis, I share my fellow panelists’ commitment to ensuring that our schools are safe for our students. The tragedies at Parkland, at Santa Fe, and elsewhere shocked our collective systems, in part because such events seemed so preventable. We can—and we must—do more.

As we seek answers, we must ground our search in the knowledge of what has been tried before and what worked, and what didn’t. We must also consider the costs, benefits, and potential tradeoffs that come with each proposal. As a researcher who has dedicated my career to identifying evidence-based strategies to improve school health and safety, I offer three recommendations:

- First, maintain the decades-long trajectory of school safety initiatives that encourage states and communities to address the full spectrum of issues that contribute to school violence.
- Second, limit strategies that could carry risk of further harm to students and communities.
- Finally, establish mechanisms that not only implement new strategies but assess their impact.

I. Maintain the trajectory of federal and state efforts to improve school safety.

Concerns about improving the safety of our schools are unfortunately not new. April marked the twentieth anniversary of the school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. This event—in addition to shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; and elsewhere—marked a turning point in the late 1990s for researchers and policymakers to take a broader view of what schools could do to prevent these tragedies from occurring. We learned, fairly quickly, that school shootings are the most extreme end of a continuum of school violence. To keep students physically safe, schools must address their overall well-being.

In 2015, along with my Child Trends colleagues, I co-authored a comprehensive literature review on the factors across all contexts of an individual's life that either contribute to or prevent youth violence.¹ Our analysis of school-level factors led to a clear conclusion: Preventing school violence requires an investment in building a positive school climate—one that supports student needs and promotes student engagement--as well as building individuals' interpersonal and social and emotional skills to form positive, healthy relationships.

Several federal investments in safe schools have reflected this research, and the results indicate significant improvements to overall school safety. The Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative, launched in 1999 by the U.S. departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Justice provided funding to communities to address the individual and community-level factors that contribute to violence. Investments in student skills-building and early childhood development, increasing access to school- and community-based mental health supports, and bolstering community and family engagement, led to significant reductions in violence in both schools and communities. In fact, in one evaluation, 96 percent of school staff at Safe Schools/Healthy Students sites reported improved school safety.²

In 2010, The U.S. Department of Education launched the Safe and Supportive Schools grant program, which provided funding for 11 state education agencies to collect data and implement prevention strategies in high schools with the worst school climates. These states partnered with school districts to survey student experiences of violence within their schools, but also their interpersonal relationships and feelings of connection with the school. These surveys were used to develop a safety score for participating schools. After five years, 73 percent of

¹ Moore, K., Stratford, B., Caal, S., Hanson, C., Hickman, S., Temkin, D., & Shaw, A. (2015). *Preventing violence: A review of research, evaluation, gaps, and opportunities*. (Research Brief). Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative National Evaluation: 2005–2008 Cohorts. Rockville, MD: 2013.

participating schools saw a significant improvement in aggregated school safety scores.³ Similar grant programs have maintained this focus on prevention, including the Department of Education’s Project Prevent and School Climate Transformation grants and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Project AWARE grants.

Competitive grant programs such as these are limited in the number of states, communities, and schools they can support. With the 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act and subsequent budget authorizations, more schools have access to the supports they need to engage in comprehensive violence prevention activities through the Student Support and Academic Enrichment formula grant program. Still, despite a historic lack of resources in this area, schools—and the policies that support them—have fundamentally shifted over the past two decades toward embedding student wellness as a key priority. And the results have been promising. At the national level, we have seen significant reductions in several school violence indicators since the late 1990s. The percentage of students in grades 9-12 who carried a weapon on school property in a 30-day period significantly decreased from about 7 percent in 1999 to just under 4 percent in 2017. The percentage of 9th-12th grade students involved in physical fights on school property also decreased from about 14 percent in 1999 to 8.5 percent in 2017.⁴

It is more difficult to ascertain a trend in school shooting incidents. Like terrorist attacks in this country, school shootings are devastating but statistically rare. According to data from the FBI, there were 37 active shooter incidents in schools from 2000 to 2017, with an average of two to three active shooter incidents occurring per year; in eight of these years, no incidents were recorded. But like terrorism, we must nevertheless take effective steps to ensure no community should ever have to experience a school shooting.

While progress has been made, there is clearly much more we can do. A growing awareness of the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences and their potential for resulting trauma; a movement toward further integrating social, emotional, and academic learning; and efforts to bridge school and community resources through integrated student supports or community schools models will bring us closer to this goal. Yet at the same time, emerging policies and practices—including proposals to further “harden” schools—have the potential to undermine the lessons of the past two decades. Unlike the strategies I just described, aspects

³ Darling, K., Osher, D., Colombi, G., Ruddy, S., & Temkin, D. (2018). Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Grants Descriptive Study Executive Summary. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. Available at: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/stategrantees/safe-and-supportive-school-s3-grants>.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 1991-2017 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data. Available at <http://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/>. Accessed on July 19, 2019.

of such proposals are not well-supported in the research, and researchers and practitioners alike are raising concerns about their potential to harm students.

II. Limit strategies that could carry risk of further harm to students and communities.

It may seem logical that adding security technology or additional law enforcement would prevent a school shooting, but the research we have is mixed, at best. The effectiveness of school-based law enforcement, access control, metal detectors, and other security measures on improving school safety has not been well-researched.⁵ The Congressional Research Service concluded the following in a report on school resource officers (SROs) commissioned after the Sandy Hook school shooting⁶:

“... the body of research on the effectiveness of SRO programs is noticeably limited, and the research that is available draws conflicting conclusions about whether SRO programs are effective at reducing school violence. In addition, the body of research on the effectiveness of SROs does not address whether their presence in schools has deterred mass shootings.”

We do know, however, that many schools that have experienced active shooter incidents over the past 20 years had security measures in place at the time of the event.⁷

While certain forms of security, such as ID procedures or basic lockdown drills, may help and pose little risk to students, emerging evidence suggests that the presence of more intensive security measures in schools may lead to unintended consequences, including increased levels of fear among students and staff; decreased perceptions of school safety⁸; increased student referrals to the criminal justice system for minor, nonviolent offenses⁹; and, particularly for low-income students, reduced academic achievement.¹⁰

Similarly, we do not know yet whether active shooter drills—those that go beyond traditional lockdown drills—help better prepare staff and students for incidents of violence, but researchers and educators alike are raising concerns that such drills may traumatize the school

⁵ Jonson, C. L. (2017). Preventing school shootings: The effectiveness of safety measures. *Victims & Offenders*, 12(6), 956-973.

⁶ James, N., & McCallion, G. (2013). School resource officers: Law enforcement officers in schools. *Congressional Research Service*. Available: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43126.pdf>

⁷ Jonson, 2017

⁸ Perumean-Chaney, S. E., & Sutton, L. M. (2013). Students and perceived school safety: The impact of school security measures. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38(4), 570-588.

⁹ James & McCallion, 2013

¹⁰ Tanner-Smith, E. E., & Fisher, B. W. (2016). Visible school security measures and student academic performance, attendance, and postsecondary aspirations. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 45(1), 195-210.

community or desensitize students to the seriousness of an attack.¹¹ Although media reports are no replacement for critically needed rigorous evaluations, they do suggest reasons to approach such practices with caution. One piece¹² quoted Elizabeth Yanelli, a teacher in Cranberry Township Pennsylvania: “[I] ...felt more traumatized than trained” after participating in an active shooter drill.

“We had colleagues shooting colleagues, we had people getting hit with [plastic] pellets. ... People were screaming, trying to run. People were tripping over each other. It was just horrendous.”

Stories similar to Ms. Yanelli’s have emerged in a number of media outlets over the past few years. We need to better understand not only whether such drills actually help students and staff respond to active shooter incidents, but also what effects such drills might have on their emotional well-being.

Security measures are often designed to keep the “bad guys” out. But history shows us that the vast majority of school shootings are perpetrated by young people who are current students at the school¹³—students who know the security procedures, as well as the blind spots.¹⁴

Instead of driving fear by focusing exclusively on physical security, we must invest in building schools that prioritize mutual trust. Children who have developed strong and caring relationships with school staff do not bring weapons to school¹⁵; when students feel a sense of attachment to their school, they are more willing to report the presence of weapons.¹⁶

Investing in both prevention and security measures that pose little risk to students should be the ideal, but too often, schools are provided only a limited amount of resources to address school safety issues. Schools are therefore motivated to implement easy and visible security measures rather than engage in a more systematic prevention effort. It is not easy to create school environments that prioritize both student well-being and safety, but the promising results

¹¹ Rygg, L. (2015). School shooting simulations: at what point does preparation become more harmful than helpful. *Child. Legal Rts. J.*, 35, 215.

¹² Blad, E. & Will, M. (2019, March 24). ‘I felt more traumatized than trained’: Active-shooter drills take toll on teachers. *Education Week*. Available: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/03/24/i-felt-more-traumatized-than-trained-active-shooter.html>

¹³ Blair, J.P. & Schweit, K.W. (2014). A Study of Active Shooter Incidents, 2000–2013. Texas State University and Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington DC.

¹⁴ Jonson, 2017

¹⁵ Watkins, A. (2008). Effects of Community, School, and Student Factors on School-Based Weapon Carrying. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 6, 386–409.

¹⁶ Connell, N.M., Barbieri, N., Reingle Gonzalez, J.M. (2014). Understanding School Effects on Students’ Willingness to Report Peer Weapon Carrying. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 13(3), 258–269.

from the Safe Schools/Healthy Students and Safe and Supportive Schools grant programs demonstrate that it can be done.

III. Ensure that there are mechanisms not only to implement new strategies but to assess their impact.

As noted throughout my testimony today, there is still much to learn about keeping schools safe. We simply do not know the impact of many of the school safety strategies that have been proposed and that are currently being implemented; and there are few mechanisms available to support such research. Further, schools themselves have few mechanisms to understand whether their strategies are working or whether they may be causing unintended harm. Research allows us to understand whether finite resources are being spent effectively and where improvements could be made.

There is currently no dedicated research stream for school safety and school violence prevention research. In FY 2018, funds from the only such program—the National Institute of Justice’s Comprehensive School Safety Initiative—were reallocated away from research activities.¹⁷ Without such research support, we will continue to debate the issues raised today, with little progress toward a resolution.

I’ll close with this: Schools’ primary function is to help students learn. Parents and communities trust that places of learning will also be places where our children are safe. When students are fearful, or when their physical, social, and emotional needs are not met, learning can be a struggle and schools can lose our trust. As we look for solutions to improve school safety, we must prioritize those that improve the conditions for learning over those that promote a culture of fear without evidence of a benefit.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

¹⁷ I and other researchers at Child Trends have been funded under this grant program.