

AASA Position Paper on School Safety

The continued gun violence in our schools has refocused Americans on the question of how to best protect children in our schools. Parents send their children off to school in the morning, trusting that they will return home at the end of the school day. Yet recent events demonstrate that more attention and more resources to improving school safety must be considered thoughtfully and sustained over time.

AASA believes all children have the right to live and learn in a safe and nurturing environment. Research demonstrates that learning is enhanced when children feel safe and have their physical and emotional needs met in a healthy school environment. This includes access to healthy foods, opportunities for physical activity, clean air to breathe, and access to preventive care and health services, including mental health. These are issues that we must face as a community and work together to solve. Schools play a critical role in helping students feel safe and supported, and in providing students more intensive services and supports as necessary.

A comprehensive approach is necessary to prevent future school violence. This document outlines the values we believe school districts must have to ensure their students are safe at all times. But school districts cannot solve this problem alone. Congress must act to direct resources to districts to enhance school safety and pass commonsense gun safety legislation.

Schools remain the safest place for children and non-gun related violence in schools continues to decline significantly over the past 30 years. Yet despite successful efforts by school districts to protect students from non-gun related crimes, in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years, there were a total of 75 school shootings with casualties, which is the highest number of school shootings recorded in 20 years. Each day, 12 children die from gun violence in America and another 32 are shot and injured. Guns are now the leading cause of death among American children and teens. Thus, a solution to preventing the killing of innocent youth cannot be the sole responsibility of the school community.

AASA recommends that every school district have the following safety programs and procedures:

- Every district should have policies in place requiring individual school and building safety plans, as well as district wide safety plans. These plans should serve as a guide to address the various safety needs in the school such as lockdown procedures, evacuations, drills and safety protocols, and personnel assignments.
- Every district should conduct regular audits to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of their school safety and security plans. First-responders, local law enforcement and the entire school community should be engaged in this process.
- Every district should communicate with parents and community members about the school-level emergency preparedness protocols to the greatest extent possible.
- Every district should provide regular training for all school employees on the district's school emergency management systems and protocols.
- Every district should work to create partnerships between schools, local law enforcement and appropriate community agencies (such as mental health) to prevent and reduce school violence.

AASA recommends Congress take the following steps to enhance school safety:

- Increase funding for Title IV of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. Schools and states pay billions of dollars annually to address the results of substance abuse, school violence and unaddressed mental health needs through local and state funding. Title IV represents a critical, sustained federal investment in successful prevention and intervention efforts.
- Re-establish funding for the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools grants designed to help schools prevent and manage emergencies.
- Increase funding for the STOP School Violence Act Grants, which distributes grants for security equipment, school hardening related-purchases, school resource officers, professional development programs for school staff to identify and address student violence against themselves and others, school threat assessments and threat assessment teams, crisis intervention teams and technology that addresses anonymous reporting.
- Significantly update and streamline the school-based Medicaid program which can provide sustainable funding for mental health personnel.
- Increase funding for mental health counselors and services in schools. Access to these services is a crucial component of any effort to prevent/respond to a school emergency.
- Support standalone funding for higher education institutions to partner with LEAs to build up the school mental health personnel pipeline and to place these critical specialized support staff in hard-to-staff schools.
- Support continued federal funding for research to identify the root causes of gun violence, the impact of school safety strategies on school shootings and the prevention of gun violence in schools.

AASA recommends Congress pass gun safety legislation that will:

- Increase enforcement of existing gun laws
- Reinstate the ban on the sale, import, transfer and ownership of assault weapons
- Ban large-capacity magazines
- Require thorough background checks for all gun purchasers
- End the “gun-show” loophole
- Prevent individuals convicted of violent crimes from being able to purchase guns
- Prevent individuals with mental health issues from purchasing or owning a gun (18 U.S.C. 922 (g))
- Punish irresponsible gun owners

We cannot make our schools armed fortresses. Whether to bring police officers into schools should be decided on a school-by-school basis. We oppose efforts to bring more guns into our schools by teachers and administrators. American schools are large buildings designed with many doors for other safety reasons, and it is unreasonable to assume that a school resource officer will always be able stop a determined shooter with an assault weapon and a large ammunition magazine. Unless we eliminate the easy access to weapons and increase the limited access to mental health care, the conditions that produce the horrific reality of recurring murder of educators and children will be unaddressed.

If we hope to prevent future tragedies at schools, we must comprehensively address both school safety and gun safety. Increased mental health services, community supports for youth, and new attitudes about violence in our entertainment must all be part of this approach. We must be willing to spend the time and resources necessary to make sustainable changes. AASA hopes that school leaders find ways of enhancing their current school safety procedures as outlined above, but we know federal funding is critical to ensuring schools remain the safest place for children to be. The time to address school safety is now.

Approved by the AASA Governing Board July 11, 2013

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