



# ISSUE BRIEF

## SCHOOL SAFETY

### BACKGROUND

The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in which 20 students and six teachers were killed on December 14, 2012, has raised many concerns from school and community officials regarding school safety. Since December 14, there has been a number of actions taken by the Administration and schools to try to prevent future acts of violence. The purpose of this document is to provide an update of federal actions and NSBA recommendations to strengthen school safety. Reportedly, since the Columbine school shooting in 1999, 203 students and teachers have been killed; and, 175 students, teachers and others have been wounded due to gun violence at our schools.

### DISCUSSION

#### *Recommendations to the Administration*

NSBA participated in a meeting at the White House with leading advocates in the education community on Wednesday, January 9, 2013. U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and Senior Advisory to the President Valerie Jarrett hosted the meeting to field recommendations about ensuring school safety and reducing gun violence.

NSBA spoke of greater access to mental health services and recommended the expansion of gun-free school zones, as well as more funding for school resource officers (SROs), which is a component of the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program. NSBA also spoke of resources for greater coordination between law enforcement agencies and school districts, including resources that may be available through homeland security grants to state and local governments for school safety (disaster preparedness and emergency response). While NSBA and a number of the other groups represented did not take a specific position on gun control, there was expressed opposition to arming teachers with guns.

#### *White House Executive Order and School Safety Plan*

As a result of the January 9<sup>th</sup> meeting, the President and Vice President announced a range of proposals that included some of NSBA's recommendations, as well as those of other education groups. The President also signed an executive order on January 16<sup>th</sup> that seeks to address both school safety and gun safety. Regarding schools, the executive order includes directives to:

- Provide school officials with proper training for active shooter situations;
- Provide incentives for schools to hire school resource officers;
- Develop model emergency response plans for schools; and,
- Launch a national dialogue led by U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan on mental health.

In addition to the President's executive order, the Administration has proposed a new Comprehensive School Safety program that would give \$150 million to school districts and law enforcement agencies to help hire an estimated 1,000 school resource officers, school psychologists, social workers, and counselors. The comprehensive plan also proposes \$30 million of one-time grants to states to help their school districts

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develop and implement emergency management plans. Other components of the national school safety plan include the following:

- A \$50 million initiative to help 8,000 more schools train their teachers and other school staff to implement strategies for improving school climate. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 18,000 schools have already put in place evidence-based strategies to improve school climate. These strategies involve certain steps for the whole school (like consistent rules and rewards for good behavior), with more intensive steps for groups of students exhibiting at-risk behavior, and individual services for students who continue to exhibit troubling behavior.
- \$15 million in “Mental Health First Aid” training for teachers and other staff who interact with youth, through “Project AWARE,” which would help detect and respond to mental illness in children and young adults, including how to encourage adolescents and families experiencing these problems to seek treatment. Project AWARE would also provide \$40 million to help school districts work with law enforcement, mental health agencies, and other local organizations to assure that students with mental health issues or other behavioral issues are referred to the services they need.
- A \$25 million proposal for offering mental health services to students affected by trauma or anxiety, as well as for conflict resolution programs, and other school-based violence prevention strategies.
- \$50 million to train social workers, counselors, psychologists, and other mental health professionals. This would provide stipends and tuition reimbursement to train more than 5,000 mental health professionals serving young people in our schools and communities.

#### *Upcoming Legislation*

There is a likelihood of several bills being introduced to improve school safety in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. Recently, Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) has announced that she is introducing two bills regarding school safety. In her remarks on the Senate floor, Boxer stated that, “we need to keep our schools safe by utilizing all of the law enforcement tools at our disposal.”

Senator Boxer’s first bill – the *School Safety Enhancements Act* – would strengthen and expand the U.S. Department of Justice’s existing COPS Secure Our Schools grants program to provide schools with more resources to install tip lines, surveillance equipment, secured entrances and other important safety measures.

Currently, the COPS Secure Our Schools program requires a 50 percent local match. Senator Boxer’s bill would allow the U.S. Department of Justice to reduce the local share to 20 percent for schools with limited resources. The bill also creates a joint task force between the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education to develop new school safety guidelines, and would increase the Secure Our Schools authorization from \$30 million to \$50 million.

Senator Boxer’s second bill – the *Save Our Students (SOS) Act* – would allow the federal government to reimburse Governors who want to use National Guard troops to help ensure that our nation’s schools are safe.

This legislation is modeled after a successful National Guard program – in place since 1989 – that allows Governors to use the Guard to assist with law enforcement efforts related to drug interdiction activities. Under the new program, Guard troops could help support local law enforcement agencies to ensure schools are safe. The National Guard has said it is “particularly well suited for domestic law enforcement support missions” because it is “located in over 3,000 local communities throughout the nation, readily accessible, routinely exercised with local first responders, and experienced in supporting neighboring communities.”

NSBA will keep you apprised of these and other bills regarding school safety as they move forward through the legislative process.

## **NSBA POSITION**

For your reference, NSBA's policy on school safety is listed below.

### **NSBA Beliefs & Policies - Article IV, Section 2 – Maintaining a Safe and Supportive School Climate**

NSBA believes that students must have safe and supportive climates and learning environments that support their opportunities to learn and that are free of abuse, violence, bullying, weapons, and harmful substances including alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. NSBA urges federal, state, and local governments, as well as parents, business, and the community, to cooperate fully with local school boards to eliminate violence, weapons, and harmful substances in schools and to ensure safe, crime-free schools. NSBA urges local school boards to incorporate into their policies and practices approaches that encourage and strengthen positive student attitudes in, and relationship to, school.

#### **2.1 Safety and Health of Students, Employees, and Visitors**

NSBA encourages local school boards to recognize that prevention, preparedness, mitigation, and emergency response and recovery plans are critical to protect the safety and health of students, employees, and all who visit school facilities. Such plans should be developed and maintained in coordination with appropriate local, state, and federal agencies including local public health, police, fire departments, transit authorities, or other agencies and first responders, and should address environmental, health, and safety risks, and potential security breaches. Such plans will be communicated to students, staff, families, and other stakeholders with exercises and updates as appropriate.

### **Article III**

#### **Federal Assistance to Education – Section 1—Philosophy of Federal Role in Education**

There are educational goals and concerns that transcend the boundaries of local school districts and states. These include improvements in student achievement and the attainment of high standards by all student groups, the elimination of widespread disparity in educational opportunities among students, improvements in the physical and mental health and safety of schoolchildren, and the intelligent participation in the democratic process by all citizens...

NSBA also believes that state and federal governments should focus on supporting comprehensive education reform which addresses: ... (f) supporting efforts to focus on the social, emotional, physical and mental health of students...

## **SUGGESTED LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS**

- Federal resources for school safety are spread across a number of agencies; and, a widely available guide should be published about where schools can access funding opportunities and/or technical assistance for disaster preparedness and emergency response operations.
- As communities prepare for readiness and response activities the need to ensure the inclusion of school safety as a component for homeland security operations with state and local first responders is paramount.
- The availability of funding for school resource officers should be addressed as an option for districts.
- Expansion and strict enforcement of the Gun Free School Zones Act should be addressed.
- Greater resources and facilitation are needed for wrap-around services to students. For example, expansion of the current Promise Neighborhoods program would be an option to address this need. (The Promise Neighborhoods program supports cradle-to-career initiatives that call on all parts of the community to provide comprehensive wraparound supports to surround schools, such as high-quality early learning, rich after-school activities, mental health services, and crime prevention).

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