



**Testimony of Ralph Aiello, Principal of Cumberland Regional High School
April 5, 2018**

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective as the Principal of Cumberland Regional High School. My school has 1100 students coming from five sending districts over 160 square miles. We are a one school building school district in Cumberland County. Like every speaker here today, my top concern is the safety and well-being of my students.

As a community with high poverty rates, we are limited in the resources available to us to address school security upgrades in our building. We have been fortunate to be able to construct a secure vestibule at the entrance of our school where visitors must present identification. We have also been able to install security cameras. However, we do not have the resources necessary to hire the staffing we need to patrol all entrances, provide staff training or fully meet the rising mental health needs of our students. It is this staffing gap that is the greatest challenge to me in meeting student and security needs.

Fortunately, our school pro-actively addressed this issue many years ago with a grant to provide school-based mental health services on site to our students from the NJ Department of Children and Families. Through this grant, an outside agency, housed in Cumberland High School, provides licensed counselors, psychologists and other specialists to address students with significant issues – depression, anxiety, anger management, suicide threats, teen pregnancy, grief counseling and substance abuse issues. Our COLT Connection Program even provides student health services including dental services to students in need. The COLT Connection is a vital resource and real world lifeline to many of our students. It is accessible on-site, available to all students and broad in scope. Students can even eat their lunch in the supportive environment of this program.

Frankly, this program is a lifeline to me and the educators in my building as well. Without the resources of this grant, we would be extremely challenged to meet our students' needs. My counselor to student ratio is 1 to 360 students. I share our 2 school resource officers across seven schools. I do not have a full-time substance abuse counselor in my school, even in these times where the threat of substance abuse, including the opioid crisis, dominates our state health care policy conversations. I have one school psychologist and one school social worker, but these individuals primarily focus their energies as members of our child study team and with other competing school needs (case management, testing, scheduling). Counselors are often utilized in ways that removes them from their core counseling functions as well (testing, scheduling). For these reasons, I urge this committee to address the strong



staffing needs of schools in the area of mental health professionals. With the rising needs of our students, schools need to be able to provide a well-trained and accessible staff to identify, and address student needs.

In closing, I agree with my colleagues on the critical importance of a safe and supportive school climate as the foundation of a secure school. At Cumberland, I work with our student leaders to engage our student body, to assess our school climate and to send the message to students that they are welcomed and valued in our school. My role as principal is to send a consistent message to students and parents that we are one community, with a duty to respect and safeguard one another.

Thank you for the chance to speak with you today.