



**NJPSA Testimony on School Security  
before the Senate and Assembly Education Committees  
April 5, 2018**

Good morning Chairwomen Ruiz and Lampitt and members of the Education Committees of the Senate and Assembly. I am Pat Wright, Executive Director of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association. With me today are NJPSA Board Member, Mike Vinella, Principal of East Brunswick High School and the current President of NJPSA, Ralph Aiello, Principal of Cumberland Regional High School. We thank you for the invitation to provide testimony on the critical issue of school security at this joint hearing. NJPSA represents New Jersey's principals and assistant principals who everyday are primarily responsible for the safety and well-being of the students they serve.

Let me begin by saying that New Jersey has done an excellent job of ensuring the physical well-being of students through the requirements of school security drills, staff training and the development of crisis intervention plans. Local districts have developed strong relationships with their local law enforcement agencies, guided by the required Memorandum of Understanding between local schools and police. School administrators have access to quality training and resources through state and local law enforcement, our educational organizations and the Office of Emergency Preparedness at the NJDOE. This training includes the anticipated efforts of the legislatively-created School Safety Specialist Academy within the NJ Department of Education to focus on best practices in school safety, prevention, intervention and emergency preparedness planning. (P.L 2017, Chapter 162.) All of these efforts lay a strong foundation for our local security efforts in every school building.

I am sure others today will discuss the need for funding to continue to support efforts to secure school buildings and protect students from unwanted intruders, and we certainly agree with the importance of funding these efforts. We welcome the recent amendments to proposed bond issue legislation, S- 2293 (Sweeney/Oroho) to support not only the expansion of career and technical needs in our state, but to address much-needed school security upgrades across our schools.

However, today our association wants to emphasize the clear need to protect our students both physically and psychologically. It is students' psychological safety that is the focus of our testimony today.



Research supports the link between school climate and school safety, between school climate and social emotional learning (SEL) and between SEL and mental health. Therefore, we believe we need to ensure schools have the training and resources to:

1. Foster the development of positive school climates where both students and adults enjoy respectful and caring relationships, where bullying and other negative behaviors are least likely to occur and where students and staff are deeply engaged in learning – both academic and social and emotional learning. This will require additional professional learning resources especially for all school climate teams, as established by the Anti-bullying Bill of Rights (ABR).
2. Integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) into every curriculum at every grade level. The NJDOE last year released a set of SEL competencies that schools are encouraged to embed in their current curriculum. Providing a systemic approach to delivering SEL instruction will allow schools to help students develop the fundamental skills needed to communicate effectively, manage emotions, resolve conflicts and make responsible decisions. These are the very skills needed to build the caring relationships so integral to a productive, inclusive and engaging school environment. These skills, when implemented with fidelity, promote the mental health of our students.
3. Develop tiered systems of support that address not only students' academic needs but also their behavioral needs. Students bring a wide variety of issues and concerns with them as they walk through the school house door. A comprehensive system of supports that addresses the wide range of student academic, emotional and behavioral needs at the school level is critical to fostering a caring school environment.
4. As part of that tiered system of support, we need to develop effective mental health interventions for struggling students, first provided by the school's mental health professionals. That means schools need to employ more mental health professionals - school psychologists, social workers, and student assistance counselors.



5. Establish a strong third tier of support – that is intensive mental health interventions outside of the school. There needs to be a coordinated effort to identify current mental health resources and to ensure that every county has an effective network of services readily available to schools. Unfortunately, the availability of mental health and behavioral services varies widely across New Jersey. This is an area we hope the Legislature can address by establishing a taskforce to identify ways to collectively address the mental health needs of our students. NJPSA would be a willing partner to this effort as our members frequently remind us of the rising mental health needs of our students and the limited resources available to many schools.

Are locked doors and security drills important? – of course they are – but they will never ensure safe and secure schools until we focus our resources on securing the psychological safety of every NJ student.

At this point, I am proud to introduce Principals Mike Vinella and Ralph Aiello to share their perspectives as practicing high school principals.