

**Testimony of Mike Vinella, Principal of East Brunswick High School  
April 5, 2018**

Good morning and thank you for the chance to discuss an issue that is foremost on my mind – the safety and well-being of the 2050 students and 290 staff of East Brunswick High School. As a school principal I take my job extremely seriously as the East Brunswick community trusts me with their most prized possession—there children. Yet, growing safety and student mental health issues have challenged our community to fund necessary programs to meet the needs of every student.

Through a collaborative effort with several agencies in EB, we have worked hard to address the physical security needs of our school community by establishing a closed campus with a single access entry system through a vestibule and comprehensive camera system. This has not been an easy task since we have 45 doors in our school buildings, but our staff and students know not to let anyone in the building from an unauthorized entrance. In fact, all students and staff are required to wear ID's. We have also worked, within the limits of our local finances, to add school security personnel to our buildings, not only to guard our doorways, but to develop trusting relationships with our students and staff. To me, it is these bonds and relationships between school staff and our students that is the key to the safety of our high school.

I am a strong advocate for the development of a positive, connected and proactive school environment. My core focus is on developing a school culture that respects and empowers our students' voice, sense of belonging and learning culture. We meet regularly with our students to develop an effective two-way communication system. On the issue of school safety, our prevailing message to students is "if you see something or hear something, say something." It is critically important that students understand the need to share the information they hear with trusted administrators and school staff. Student ownership of their role in reporting potential safety issues is an integral part of our security efforts. This was no more evident than earlier this year when a student and parent shared an online threat made. Through a collaborative effort between our school administrative team and police department this threat was addressed prior to school starting that day.

How do we do this? This truly a school wide effort with the counseling team playing a bigger role than ever in our schools. We have developed a system of supports through our student assistance specialists, counselors, teachers and school security staff. One targeted program developed by our counseling department is our Sources of Strength program where students and staff reach out as "buddies" to other students within the school. The student may be new to East Brunswick or a student referred through the counseling program. Our goal is to reach out to every student to create a sense of belonging and break the social alienation that can occur in a large high school setting. Our efforts have been so successful that we have expanded our outreach to middle school students on the cusp of entering our high school.

Additionally, with the world so divided today, and the increasing impact of social media, we have created a program to celebrate the positive events, people and activities in our school. We call this our EBHS One initiative. Working with our school safety and climate committee and Principals Council, we have developed a strong system of clubs and activities for students to engage in that fosters their connections to our school and the outside community. Yet, tightening budgets have limited the ability to build out these proactive programs that bring students and staff together.

Currently, my colleagues and I are also forced to deal with the changes in our juvenile system which has placed greater stress on the schools. Previous offenses addressed by the juvenile system are now being kicked back to the schools to handle through station house adjustments. Under current policies and programs schools are being forced to deal with these cases with limited resources. In fact, many times these students are placed on out of school suspension. Having the funds to develop third tier intervention programs that can keep these students in school and help to foster the relationship and sense of belonging would be a huge help to our students in crisis.

One recent promising third tier intervention is our creation of a Flex School within our school for students requiring station house adjustments or experiencing depression, anxiety or other emotional needs. As an educator, I am seeing rising numbers of our students suffering from anxiety and depression. To address this, we operate this Flex school program after the regular school day from 2:30 pm to 6:30 pm to provide students both academic and intensive counseling supports to ensure their success. A counselor, school psychologist, teacher or administrator may refer a student to this program, with parental consent, through our Intervention and Referral System (I&RS). During a student's participation in this after hours' program, a behavioral improvement plan, with support services, is developed. We are seeing positive growth in these students both socially, emotionally and academically.

In closing, I believe the key to school security efforts is a strong, supportive school climate. To achieve this, schools need funding to not only address the physical components of their school facilities, but more importantly, resources to hire the staff and on-site mental health services needed in today's schools. On my wish list would be the ability to hire additional counselors to provide one student assistance specialist per grade level in my school. Funding is also needed to provide professional development not only for teachers, but for the needs of school leaders charged with implementing the best school security and school climate practices in our schools, as well as meet the increased number of station house adjustments thrust upon us. I also think schools need a system of mental health resources and networks outside the school itself to support our efforts in working with parents and students in need.

Thank you for your consideration and support of our efforts.