



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

**Deputy State Superintendent Anthony Evers
Comments on School Safety**

**Presented to the State of Wisconsin Legislative Council
Special Committee on School Safety
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Thank you to Chairperson Lehman and members of the committee for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Tony Evers, and I serve as the Deputy State Superintendent of Public Instruction and with me today is Steve Fernan, Assistant Director of the Student Services Prevention and Wellness Team. We are very pleased to be able to be here and to represent State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster, in providing thoughts and recommendations on the very important topic of school and student safety.

The State Superintendent and the staff at the DPI recognize the importance of this issue as it impacts on our primary mission of supporting public schools in our state, and in insuring that every student has the opportunity to learn and prepare for success in life after their formal pre-K-12 education has been completed. We recognize that threats to the safety of students compromise the ability to be successful in school and that we must do everything in our power to diminish those threats so that students are free to learn. I will be providing information to you today on the scope of the problem, what the department's response has been to address these issues, and recommendations for action that this committee might take in the future.

To begin with, I think it is important to state that schools in Wisconsin continue to be among the safest places for students to be in our communities. However, we are very concerned about the feeling

that is increasingly expressed to us by school staff, parents, and others that schools are becoming less safe. Principals in particular have been vocal about their concerns over the rise in everyday violence and the steep increase in the amount of their time that must be spent dealing with issues of school safety. While many things can be addressed at school, the reasons behind the violence and the measures we take to address it often extend far beyond the school.

I want to create some context for what we hear. Wisconsin has two incidents of death identified as taking place in a school in the past few decades. They are the shooting death of Wauwatosa West H.S. administrator Dale Breitlow, at the hands of an adult intruder, and the shooting death of Weston School Principal John Klang by a local student. While tragic, these incidents are a rare occurrence across the country and even rarer here in Wisconsin. Not to minimize these individual tragedies, but there is not a growing trend nationally or locally for the most serious types of school safety threats that might be addressed, that of traumatic death.

In terms of other types of threats to student safety that are present in Wisconsin, we see both positive trends and issues for concern. The 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) of Wisconsin high school students, tracked since 1993 shows significant reductions in the percentage of students carrying weapons on school grounds, the percentage of students reporting being injured or threatened with a weapon at school, and the percentage of students reporting being in a physical fight on school property. While these trends led to Wisconsin being recognized by the National Educational Goals Panel as the only state to make significant progress toward the safe schools goal, there are other trends that are of concern that we must focus on today and in the future.

One very large concern to the department is bullying in all of its overt and subtle forms. Bullying has become a great concern for students, their parents, school officials, and community residents. We share this concern over teasing, exclusion, harassment, threats, physical assaults, and even cyber bullying. These actions result in a real fear and the loss of focus on the teaching and learning missions that should be paramount in our state's schools. Data from the YRBS paints a

different picture for us about how safe students feel as compared to the statistics I just referenced about fighting and weapon carrying. A higher percentage of 2007 Wisconsin students reported that they did not attend school in the month prior to the survey due to fears for their safety, than those surveyed in 1993. Similarly, the number of Wisconsin students reporting they were subjected to bullying has continued to rise. Some of you may recall hearing in the aftermath of a potential student-planned attack at Green Bay East High School, which was averted due to a positive school culture that encouraged another student to speak up, that the planners of the thwarted attack were claiming their rage was inspired by being continuously bullied and harassed. While not an acceptable excuse, the presence of these behaviors can and do have impact on their victims, and potentially lead to the type of planned retaliation that was avoided due to both the student coming forward and fast action by school officials in intervening.

An additional and growing concern related to student health and safety involves student mental health and contributions to depression and suicidal ideation. Coupled with limited access to health care, that may include lack of treatment for physical health problems, untreated mental illness in students has an impact on their school success and is often a distraction or worse for their fellow students. To give you a flavor of how this problem is impacting schools and students close to where we sit right now, a small study of schools in the Sun Prairie and Madison Metropolitan School Districts indicates that 15 percent of students in these schools have mental health concerns. Further, this study revealed that a variety of behavioral issues emerge from students with mental health concerns including substance abuse, anger, anxiety, attention disorder, and depression. All of these seriously impact students' ability to achieve school success and can contribute to dangerous behaviors. According to the 2007 YRBS 22 percent of high school students experienced symptoms of depression and seven percent actually attempted suicide. For youth ages 10-19, Wisconsin's suicide rate is 13th highest in the nation and 42 percent higher than the average, with one person in this age group dying by suicide each week in the state.

The physical condition of some school buildings also contributes to concerns about health and safety of Wisconsin students. While much focus is rightly placed on behavioral concerns and potential acts of violence toward self and others, we cannot underestimate the importance of the physical environment in keeping student safe at schools in our state. A study of the condition of public school buildings, last conducted in 2000, reflects the effects of years of delayed maintenance due to fiscal constraints.

- 15 % of the buildings were reported to be in need of replacement or major repair
- The average cost for these renovations or repairs was estimated to be almost \$1.8 million
- 14 % of schools were estimated to be in need of roof replacement, 7% needed floor or foundation work, 18% needed exterior wall, door, or window repair/replacement, and 7% needed basic life safety enhancements including emergency lighting and exit signs.

Physical plant problems also include environmental threats in addition to structural concerns. Mold in Madison's Chavez elementary school forced closure after teachers and students complained of illnesses. Similar problems were reported in Monona Grove, Milton, Sun Prairie, Oconomowoc, Sheboygan, and Oshkosh. Surveys of school district administrators have shown that under revenue limits school maintenance and facility needs are increasingly being postponed. We can only surmise that the aforementioned needs still exist or have grown since 2000.

The DPI has been vigorous in addressing school and student safety issues for many years. These efforts include the following:

- A Safe Schools Task Force to identify potential threats to school and student safety. A final report and recommendations were broadly distributed and became the foundation for further department initiatives.
- As a result of one of the study's recommendations, the department launched a broad anti-bullying initiative that included development of curriculum modules for elementary and middle schools. These were distributed to every school district statewide along with policy guidelines.

- Developed and produce monthly web casts on school safety best practices that allow school personnel to be trained in best practices in school safety and violence prevention. These are archived for future use and have resulted in thousands of viewings statewide. The most recent broadcast “The Weston Tragedy: Lessons Learned” provides a look back and implications for prevention and healing after a tragedy.
- Administered grants and provided training and consultation to help schools develop drug and violence prevention programs, as well as school nursing and health services.
- Worked with the legislature on passage of the Gun Free Schools Act to insure significant and consistent response to the presence of firearms in schools
- Worked with partners statewide to plan and host the Forum on Youth Violence annual training conferences for over a decade. More recently, partnered with the Office of Justice Assistance, Wisconsin Emergency Management, and the Center for Citizen, Youth and School Preparedness in planning statewide events that included “table-top” planning exercises
- Featured resources on a dedicated school safety web site that provided high-quality, free resources to school officials statewide.

While these efforts have been significant, more can and should be done. We recommend the committee consider the following:

- Some measure of mental health parity legislation to allow for greater coverage to more students who currently do not receive mental health services. A number of other states have passed mental health parity legislation. It should be noted as well that Wisconsin is one of many states with a shortage of psychiatrists specifically trained and certified to treat children and adolescents with mental health disorders. While Wisconsin is near the national average for the number of psychiatrists, many practice in

larger metropolitan areas posing a dilemma for rural schools that need to provide access to services.

- The recommendation by Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen from September 6, 2007 that state and federal lawmakers should examine privacy laws in an effort to remove barriers to effective information sharing. Appropriate state and federal agencies should clarify how information, including mental health records, can be shared under existing state and federal laws.
- Create a new annual grant appropriation to reimburse school districts for costs allowable under the Safe and Drug Free Schools Act, but not paid for under that act, such as developmentally appropriate drug/violence prevention and information dissemination; law enforcement and security activities, counseling mentoring and referral services; programs/services for truancy, suspensions, and expulsions; emergency intervention following traumatic events; youth suicide warning training; conflict resolution and peer mediation; expanding/improving school based mental health services. These activities are allowed under the federal grant program, but diminishing appropriations by congress have not allowed schools to maintain programs developed with these funds. State grants to supplement this program, for the neediest school districts, might provide the support needed to keep school safe
- Amend state statutes to allow districts to move forward with facility repairs without going to referendum for conditions that directly and immediately threaten school safety.
- Finally, follow the example of at least 20 other states by creating a statewide school safety center. These centers provide resources in conducting trainings on violence prevention and crisis response. They have staff that conducts threat assessments and resource officer trainings. They serve as statistical and research centers to track trends and evaluations of programs implemented throughout the state. Wisconsin might join the ranks of these states and receive technical assistance through the U.S. Department of

Education's Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools in the development of this center.

Threats to student health and safety that appear most often in our schools are not primarily due to the presence of weapons and physical assaults, but rather, lie more in the insidious and persistent feeling of being unsafe due to the presence of bullying and harassing behaviors. These threats also are manifested through untreated mental health concerns. Physical and environmental safety challenges are posed by buildings that may hide dangers and illnesses due to neglect resulting from fiscal constraints. Finally, these threats may continue unabated due to the lack of a coordinated effort that a consistent fiscal or leadership resource might provide.

I want to thank the committee once again for allowing me to share these thoughts and recommendations with you. I am providing packets with more information in support of the comments I have made. Steve Fernan and I would welcome any questions you might have at this time.