

## **Testimony Before the Legislative Council Special Committee on School Safety**

**By**

**John D. Forester, Director of Government Relations  
School Administrators Alliance**

**July 22, 2008**

Chairman Lehman and members of the Committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you today regarding school safety in Wisconsin and the work of the Special Committee on School Safety.

As I prepared for this testimony, I was immediately struck by the enormous breadth and complexity of the school safety issue. In its deliberations, this Committee could find itself discussing suspensions and expulsions, staff safety training, bullying prevention, points of entry and exit, surveillance equipment, school safety program costs and the challenges posed by students with mental health needs, to name just a few issues.

In my discussions with school administrators around the state, I was also struck by how school safety challenges vary widely from district to district, as do the solutions to school safety problems. In other words, what works in Green Bay is not necessarily appropriate in Greenwood.

That is why I encourage the Committee to hear from a variety of school districts – small, medium, large; urban, rural and suburban – to get a flavor of the unique school safety challenges in districts throughout the state.

I would like to offer the Committee the informational resources of the SAA and the expertise of our membership. In the past, I have worked with the leadership of other study committees to arrange testimony from school administrators throughout Wisconsin. Mr. Chairman, I would be happy to work with you and staff to do the same for this study committee, if you so desire.

I am going to focus my testimony today on two major issues: 1) the challenges school districts face in funding school safety programs in a time of competing educational needs and limited resources; and 2) the school safety challenges posed by students with mental health needs.

The cumulative impact of revenue limits over time have served to squeeze school budgets tighter and tighter. In a nutshell, the problem is this: allowable school district revenue growth is far less than the growth of a district's "fixed" costs, most notably staffing, utilities and transportation. The average school district in Wisconsin sees annual revenue growth of less than 3%, while annual cost increases for staffing, utilities and transportation can easily exceed 5%. This year, many districts are reporting transportation and utility cost increases of more than 30% alone. After 15 years of belt-tightening and budget cutting under the cap, the gap between allowable revenue growth and fixed cost increases is forcing extremely difficult decisions for school districts on how to spend its limited resources.

And it is within this difficult framework that decisions regarding school safety funding are made by school districts. Everybody wants a safe and secure learning environment for children. We have quality professionals in the field working to ensure that that is a reality. However, school safety is not the only challenge facing school districts. School administrators have told me that spending for the safety program may not be a fiscal priority unless there is data that clearly shows it is a problem. Also, spending on security measures often requires increasing class sizes, cutting staff and/or cutting educational programs in order to pay for it.

In an effort to dig a little deeper into this issue, the SAA conducted a quick-and-dirty survey of district administrators and business officials last week. We received responses from 234 of those surveyed. I would like to share with you some of the results of this survey.

- **Did you have to do without personnel, equipment or materials for your school safety program because of fiscal constraints? If yes, please explain.**

**Yes – 53.6%**  
**No – 46.4%**

Dozens of respondents reported they do not have the funds to pay for video surveillance cameras. Many districts have either had to cut an existing police liaison officer (PLO) or have never been able to fund the position. Others said they would like to add/upgrade safety measures (i.e., redesigned points of entry/exit, electronic locks, communications systems, monitoring personnel, etc.) if funds were available.

- **Did you have to do without personnel, equipment or materials for your academic program because of priority needs in your school safety program? If yes, please explain.**

**Yes – 21.4%**  
**No – 78.6%**

I would like to share a couple of the responses to this question.

*“Our professional staff is down 22% in just 4 years while only being down 51 students! One less needed teacher position is gone to finance the police liaison program.”*

*“We have cut staff the last two years to allow for expenses to improve security for the entry doors at 3 of our 4 schools and to add a School Resource Officer.”*

*“Design modifications for the entrances in a majority of our school buildings to provide controlled access and a safer environment required tens of thousands of dollars to be diverted from other areas – like ordering new textbooks that were deferred until a future year. There is not enough money to provide the necessary academic programs and retrofit buildings for today’s safety concerns.”*

These concerns led the SAA to support a proposal developed during the 2007-09 state budget process by the Badger State Sheriff’s Association (BSSA), the Wisconsin Sheriff’s and Deputy Sheriff’s Association (WSDSA) and the Wisconsin Chiefs of Police Association (WCPA) to provide a revenue limit adjustment for school safety expenditures equal to \$100 per pupil or \$40,000 per school district, whichever is greater. This proposal made it into the Senate budget proposal, but was ultimately removed by budget conferees in the final budget compromise. As an alternative, the SAA believes that a school safety categorical aid program also merits consideration.

For years, Wisconsin school administrators have decried the inadequate supply of appropriate services for children with significant mental health needs. The state’s closure of some small mental health programs for school-age children in recent years has only served to exacerbate the problem. Some students with significant mental health needs may also have one or more educational disabilities. The most challenging of these students can be extremely disruptive, aggressive and violent. Their uncontrollable outbursts can endanger students, staff and themselves. School facilities and school personnel are simply not equipped to handle some of these children.

Please allow me the opportunity to provide a couple of examples. The first is a 15 year old male student in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He is classified as EBD (Emotional Behavioral Disorder) and has been diagnosed with depression and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). On numerous occasions, this student has threatened staff and other students with physical harm and death. He has attended a private facility, although they currently will not allow him to attend and are attempting to provide neutral site tutoring. The costs for the private placement are \$36,000 per year - \$22,000 for tuition and \$14,000 for transportation.

John Forester Testimony  
July 22, 2008  
Page 4

The second example is a 12 year old male student in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He is classified as EBD and has been diagnosed as bi-polar. He has multiple medications. After the district was unsuccessful in controlling the student's escalating pattern of non-compliance and aggression, they secured an alternative placement at a private facility. He initially adjusted well, but then began acting out on the long bus ride to the facility. He would get very aggressive, run around the bus, hit students and threaten to kill everyone. Two of the incidents involved law enforcement and the district now must transport the student by himself in a van at a cost of \$165 per day. The costs for the placement are approximately \$25,000 for tuition and \$29,700 for transportation.

As you can see, alternative placements in these cases can be quite costly. And, as we discussed earlier, within our current revenue cap framework these resources must be shifted from somewhere.

I hope the Committee agrees that the lack of appropriate services for students with significant mental health needs is a school safety concern worthy of consideration and study.

Thank you for your consideration of our views. If you should have any questions regarding the SAA's testimony, please contact me at 608-242-1370.