
WISCONSIN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION COUNCIL

Affiliated with the National Education Association

*Great Schools
benefit
Everyone!*

**Testimony to the
Legislative Council Special Committee on School Safety
Senator John Lehman, Chair
Tuesday, July 22, 2008**

My name is Glenn Schmidt, and I am a teacher at Northside Elementary School in Sun Prairie. I started teaching in Sun Prairie in 1977 with seven high needs elementary special education students—six boys and one girl. I finished my 31st year at Northside this year with seven high needs elementary special education students—six boys and one girl.

There were a number of differences between the two classes mostly involving economic and ethnic status. But the most striking difference between the two classes was this: In 1977 I worked with 14 parents for the seven kids. This year I worked with seven. Or fewer.

I bring this up as a preface to my remarks on school safety to illustrate that schools do not exist in a vacuum. We are not insulated from society's changes. Indeed, those changes are often magnified in our schools.

Let's back up just to 1990 to compare some of the major demographic shifts that have taken place in Wisconsin schools. Children identified as special needs—the children I serve—are up 56% in those 18 years; those in poverty have gone up 97%; and English language learners have increased 276%.

Certainly these changes make keeping children safe more complicated, but more importantly in an era of revenue limits and finite dollars, safety has to compete with every other educational need, from increased fuel prices to new textbook adoptions that may cost \$100 or more per text to the high cost of standardized testing.

When I started teaching in 1977 school safety mostly meant keeping kids from getting too close to buses or cleaning bloody noses after an especially rough recess football game.

Like the family structure of the seventies that I alluded to, much has changed in school safety. Let's take a quick look around the state at 12 different districts to see what they are doing (or not able to do) to keep schools safe.

Wausau: The district spent \$160,000 this year for security and safety. That's for an emergency generator, smoke detectors, fire alarm and security systems. It will spend as much or more next year.

Deerfield: Security will be one facet of its September referendum. The district needs \$15,000-20,000 for security cameras. It also wants to replace an

Mary Bell, President

Dan Burkhalter, Executive Director



antiquated PA system to allow communication with all schoolrooms. Remodeling school entrances to make them more secure will eventually cost another \$300,000.

Stoughton: The district will spend up to \$135,000 to install 60 surveillance cameras.

Ashland: The police school resource officer assigned to the middle school for the past 12 years has become a victim of budget cuts. The districts of **Chilton** and **Marinette** also lost an officer. **Manitowoc** lost three. **Sun Prairie**, my home district, lost all five of its popular police liaisons three years ago. This year our district had three meetings on escalating gang behavior, each attended by 100 citizens. Would we be at this level of concern if those officers were still there?

Appleton: The district has spent between two and three million dollars over the last decade on school safety. Besides some of the things we've already discussed, Appleton installed better exterior lighting at all schools, made sure cell phones were available to key personnel, provided training, and removed vision barriers.

Milwaukee: Position cuts for school social workers, school psychologists, nurses and support staff have hindered the schools' ability to deal with social issues and properly maintain the school environment. One teacher reported that in some dangerous neighborhoods safety aides patrol both within the building and the grounds outside. Without their help children would not even be able to go out for recess. A Milwaukee support staff member reported that staff are often taken out of classroom/learning duties to monitor the front door. A teacher at one Milwaukee high school reported that in May the police were called to his building an average of once per day during the last month of school and still it doesn't have a police liaison officer.

Rice Lake: It lost its police/school liaison officer two years ago when the city and school district fought over who should pay for what.

Madison: The district has raided education and other budgets to pay for safety improvements. Repair and cleaning budgets have also been shortchanged, causing floors and bathrooms to remain uncleaned, carpets not vacuumed, trashcans not emptied and regular cleaning cycles disrupted. Cuts in the custodial staff have resulted in a generally unhealthy environment. Security personnel will cost about \$925,000 in this year's budget. Redoing access doors and accompanying electronics at 41 schools will cost more than \$200,000. Loading docks at five schools need to be secured at a cost of \$84,000.

Paying for Safety

I think it's pretty clear from our roundup of a dozen districts that they have a pretty good idea of what they need to do to keep children safe. What's not clear is how they are going to pay for the changes.

State revenue controls, enacted 15 years ago at a time when safety concerns were much less evident, make no allowance or exception for districts that need to spend more money to keep schools safe.

In WEAC and WASDA's annual survey on the effect of revenue controls, superintendents were asked the following question: *What have been the effects of the revenue controls, if any, on your district's capacity to implement programs that improve school safety?* Responses were: 54% very negative or negative versus 1% positive or very positive.

Thus more than half of the superintendents surveyed believe revenue controls, in their current form, negatively impact the safety of children.

Internal Threats to Safety

Up until now we've been considering mostly threats to safety posed by forces beyond the school. Unfortunately as they learned in Columbine and we learned in Weston and Green Bay, threats from within can be even more problematic.

There's something I didn't tell you about my employment history. Before Sun Prairie hired me in 1977, I spent four years working at the La Crosse Home for Children, a residential facility for young children who were deemed too difficult, dangerous or disruptive for public schools. Few such places exist today and children who would have been treated there are now being educated in public schools. That is essentially what the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the federal special education law, mandates.

Let me just tell you a quick story about what this means. I was working with a fifth grade boy three years ago. He was a child who constantly fixated on violence and occasionally and coolly acted upon what he was experiencing in his fantasy world. When he had free time he would draw soldiers, weapons, and blood gushing from wounds. One day I was reading with him in some harmless text when out of the blue he said, "Mr. Schmidt, do you know if you put a body in kitty litter you can keep it from smelling?"

In fact I didn't know that and had never thought about it.

Our response (among other things) was to provide as much adult coverage for him and his class as we could afford. Somehow we got him through fifth grade without major damage to him, his classmates, or his teachers.

While the incidents of severe school violence are declining overall, they could happen anywhere at any time and school districts need to be prepared. Statistics show that incidents like bullying are on the rise. Left unaddressed, these situations can lead to extreme violence. The goal is to address this on the front end. Prevention is key.

So here's what worries me. According to the survey referenced above, 75% of districts reported increasing class sizes; 55% reported reducing counseling services; 75% reported offering fewer staff development opportunities for teachers.

*Great Schools
benefit
Everyone!*

If our goal is to improve school safety from within, we are heading inexorably in the wrong direction. We need teachers with small enough classes to have a personal relationship with each student in class. We need more counselors to address serious emotional issues. We need more staff development opportunities for teachers and support personnel to be trained in keeping our schools safe. And we need police liaisons and other connections with the community that don't leave us isolated and afraid.

Investments in great schools build strong communities. The current budgetary structure that forces districts to choose between school safety and other priorities even if they want to spend their own district money is too inflexible and doesn't meet the needs of today's schools. With your help that policy can be changed.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak here today.

Glenn Schmidt
227 North Street
Sun Prairie, WI 53590
glenn99@charter.net