



WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

SCHOOL SAFETY

Room 225 Northwest, State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin

July 22, 2008
10:00 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

[The following is a summary of the July 22, 2008 meeting of the Special Committee on School Safety. The file copy of this summary has appended to it a copy of each document prepared for or submitted to the committee during the meeting. A digital recording of the meeting is available on our Web site at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lc>.]

Call to Order and Roll Call

Chair Lehman called the meeting to order. The roll was called and it was determined that a quorum was present.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: Sen. John Lehman, Chair; Reps. Don Pridemore and Sondy Pope-Roberts; and Public Members Vincent Flores, Betsy Georg, Tom Grogan, Gary Myrah, Robert Rosch, Luke Valitchka, Laura Vernon, and Luis Yudice.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS EXCUSED: Sen. Luther Olsen; and Public Members Richard Anderson and Terry Milfred.

COUNCIL STAFF PRESENT: Russ Whitesel, Senior Staff Attorney; Melissa Schmidt, Staff Attorney; and Tracey Young, Support Staff.

APPEARANCES: Tony Evers, Deputy, State Superintendent, and Steve Fernan, Assistant Director of the Student Services/Prevention and Wellness Team, Department of Public Instruction; John Ashley, Wisconsin Association of School Boards; Christine Clair, School Board Member, La Crosse Public Schools, and Roger Hillebrand, School Board Member, Belleville Public Schools; John Forester, School Administrators Alliance; and Glenn Schmidt, Wisconsin Education Association Council.

Chairperson's Remarks

Chair Lehman introduced himself and welcomed the committee. He explained that the committee will be looking at how the state can improve school safety so that school can be the safest part of a child's day. He said that his goal was for the committee's final product to be bipartisan legislation.

Russ Whitesel, Legislative Council Senior Staff Attorney, introduced the Legislative Council staff members assigned to work with the committee and reviewed committee procedures outlined in the "Committee Guidelines" distributed to the committee. He discussed how to obtain documents disseminated, explained the process for reimbursement of expenses, and the committee's timeline. Finally, he noted that committee members must be present to vote.

Introduction of Committee Members

Chair Lehman invited committee members to introduce themselves. Each member explained where he or she worked and what his or her goals of the committee were.

Description of Material Distributed

Mr. Whitesel briefly described the Minnesota report, "School Safety: Lessons Learned," that was distributed to be a reference for committee members.

Presentations by Invited Speakers

[Note: Testimony and documents referred to by the speakers are posted on the committee's Internet site.]

Tony Evers, Deputy State Superintendent, and Steve Fernan, Assistant Director of the Student Services/Prevention and Wellness Team, Department of Public Instruction

Mr. Evers provided information on the scope of the school safety problem, the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) responses to the issues, and recommendations for action that the committee may take in the future. He began by mentioning two Wisconsin shootings that resulted in death – administrator Dale Breitlow, Wauwatosa West High School, and Principal John Klang, Weston School District.

Mr. Evers stated that the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), tracking Wisconsin high school students since 1993, shows reductions in students carrying weapons on school grounds, being injured or threatened with a weapon at school, and reporting being in a physical fight on school property. He stated that a very large concern to DPI is school bullying. YRBS indicates that a higher percentage of students feel unsafe in 2007 than students in 1993. Mr. Evers stated that another growing concern for school safety is mental health, as it contributes to depression and suicidal ideation. Wisconsin's suicidal rate for 10-19 year-olds ranks 13th highest in the nation. Mr. Evers added that the physical condition of school buildings also impacts school safety.

Mr. Evers listed DPI initiatives addressing school safety, including: (1) a Safe Schools Task Force; (2) a broad anti-bullying initiative; (3) monthly webcasts to train school personnel in school safety and violence prevention; (4) grant funding to develop drug and violence prevention programs; (5) the annual Forum on Youth Violence training conference; and (6) the Gun-Free Schools Act.

Mr. Evers recommended that the committee consider legislation to: (1) provide mental health parity in services statewide; (2) remove barriers to effective information sharing; (3) create new annual grant appropriation to pay for costs not paid for by the Safe and Drug Free Schools Act; (4) allow districts to make facility repairs without going to referendum; and (5) create a statewide school safety center.

Mr. Evers invited Mr. Fernan to answer questions regarding specific DPI data collection. Mr. Fernan stated that DPI has no way to track the amount of expenditures paid per pupil on school safety. Mr. Fernan also said that the statutes do not require annual school safety reports to be filed with DPI. He said that the only data collected in information required by the No Child Left Behind Act.

John Ashley, Executive Director, Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Christine Clair, School Board Member, La Crosse Public Schools, and Roger Hillebrand, School Board Member, Belleville Public Schools

Mr. Ashley reported that school boards are committed to providing safe learning environments. They assess students, facilities, and crisis management plans and policies. He stated that violent school incidences have declined as a result of school boards combining efforts with administrators, teachers, and others. He recommended four actions for the committee to undertake: (1) identify flexible funding sources to be spent on diverse school safety issues; (2) review state and federal school safety funding sources and eliminate any barriers to using them flexibly; (3) review any state and county programs funding to identify program shortfalls; and (4) review statutory provisions that address the enrollment of expelled students, payment of residential care centers, and public records, respectively.

Ms. Clair described the problems that the La Crosse Public Schools have in trying to maintain and improve school safety. She shared that the average school building age is 56-years old. She explained that the school district taxpayers have voted against various referenda; as a result the school board may have to divert instructional funds to address security, safety, and facility maintenance problems. She suggested that the committee consider giving school boards the ability to obtain loans outside of revenue caps so that districts such as La Crosse can make school improvements even when taxpayers vote down a referendum. In response to questions, Ms. Clair said that if the school board had the ability to vote to spend outside of the revenue cap, the vote on the most recent proposal would have been unanimous.

Mr. Hillebrand reported that security in schools work. When Belleville Schools put security cameras into the schools, calls to police declined from one to two times per week to one to two times per semester. Students know that they are being watched. He stated that if funding for school safety issues was removed from underneath the cap, it would be very beneficial. Mr. Hillebrand said that because the school district now knows that security cameras are a worthwhile expense, the Belleville School District is willingly spending an additional \$30,000 to also install them in the intermediate school.

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

Mr. Forester discussed challenges to school safety with limited resources and school safety challenges posed by students with mental health needs. He reported to the committee that these school safety challenges and their solutions vary widely from district to district. He suggested that the committee hear from a variety of school districts and offered his assistance in arranging for them.

He said that the average school district has an annual revenue growth of less than 3% but increasing cost of 5% or more. He said that some school districts have transportation and utility costs increasing more than 30% alone. Mr. Forester stated that school administrators report that spending for safety may not be a fiscal priority unless there is data clearly showing a problem. He also said that spending on security often means increasing class sizes, while cutting staff and reducing educational programs.

Glenn Schmidt, Special Education Teacher, Sun Prairie School District, Wisconsin Education Association Council

Mr. Schmidt reported that school safety today competes with every educational need, from increased fuel prices to new textbooks. He reported the funding problems in which various school districts find themselves and showed the results when there is not enough safety funding. He shared several personal stories about teaching, showing the needs of students and the importance of safe schools.

Mr. Schmidt stated that a survey conducted among various Wisconsin Schools indicated that in response to the revenue cap limits: 75% of districts report increasing class sizes; 55% report reduced counseling services; and 75% report offering fewer staff development opportunities. Mr. Schmidt reported that the state needs more teachers with small class sizes to foster a personal relationship with each student. He also stated that the state needs more counselors to address serious emotional issues, more staff development training, and police liaisons in each school. When asked how one can find data on various safety issues, Mr. Schmidt explained that some of this type of information relating to students is confidential and only shared on a need-to-know basis.

Discussion of Committee Assignment

Chair Lehman asked committee members for suggestions on issues that they would like the committee to consider and information that they feel the committee should address. Among the suggestions were issues and information regarding: (1) school safety solutions and best practices; (2) centralized school safety-related services; (3) environmental health hazards in schools; (4) tax implications from referenda and cap eliminations; (5) referenda data addressing school safety; (6) information-sharing restrictions regarding special education students and adjudicated delinquents; and (7) Georgia's statute requiring parents to attend court-ordered classes.

Other Business

There was no other business brought before the committee.

Plans for Future Meetings

The next meeting of the Special Committee will be *Tuesday, September 9, 2008, in the Legislative Council Conference Room, 1 East Main Street, Suite 401, Madison.*

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 1:30 p.m.

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