



June 14, 2019

Dear Chairman Sonney and Chairman Roebuck:

CeaseFire Pennsylvania is the advocacy arm of CeaseFirePA, Pennsylvania's leading gun violence prevention organization. Our mission is to end the epidemic of gun violence in the Commonwealth and across the country through education, coalition-building and advocacy. Because we share the Committee's goal to ensure that Pennsylvania schools are safe places for our students to learn and for our teachers and administrators to work, we urge the House Education Committee to oppose SB 621. We do not believe the provisions of SB 621 -- provisions that allow additional categories of school security personnel to be armed on duty -- will make students, faculty or school personnel safer.

We all want our schools to be safe places for students to learn and teachers to teach. And for the most part, they are. As the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence has reported¹, schools are some of the safest places for our children, with only a very small percentage of homicides of school-age children occurring on school grounds, on the way to or from school or during school-sponsored events.² And, following enactment of federal laws regulating guns in schools in the 1990s, there was a significant decrease in the homicide rates for school-age children during school or school-sponsored events in the U.S.³

Dr. Peter Langman, a psychologist from Allentown, Pennsylvania, and a nationally recognized expert on school shootings and school safety, has explained that although media coverage makes it seem that school shootings are common events, they actually are very rare:

Even if there were a rampage attack at a school every month (which is not the case), resulting in twelve such attacks a year, with over 120,000 K-12 schools in the country, this would mean that on average a school could expect a mass shooting once every ten thousand years. Because the likelihood of such an attack is extremely low, it is important to think carefully about how best to utilize resources to maintain school safety.⁴

In thinking about how to best utilize those scarce resources, we should aim for the legislature and our school districts to be informed by good, solid data. The Department of Homeland Security

¹ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/guns-in-schools/>

² Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report, School-Associated Student Homicides – United States, 1992-2006 (Jan. 18, 2008), at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5702a1.htm>; National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of education statistics- Table 228.10: School-associated violent deaths of all persons, homicides and suicides of youth ages 5-18 at school, and total homicides and suicides of youth ages 5-18, by type of violent death: 1993-93 to 2012-13. December 2015.

³ Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report, School-Associated Student Homicides – United States, 1992-2006 (Jan. 18, 2008), at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5702a1.htm>. The rates decreased from 0.07 per 100,000 students to 0.03 per 100,000 students. Id.

⁴ Letter of Dr. Peter Langman to Tamaqua Area School Board, November 7, 2018.

has developed threat assessment guidelines for schools that emphasize information gathering, dissemination, and close coordination with public safety authorities as the best practices for interdicting a would-be school shooter.⁵ These guidelines focus on prevention, taking coordinated action to get students in crisis the help they need and to prevent attacks before they occur. The goal is prevention, not just reaction after the fact. This is the type of work our legislature should be funding and our school districts should be engaging in.

Pennsylvania already has in place a system that empowers school districts to employ armed police officers and/or school resource officers. There is a process by which the school districts determine who to employ, and there is a judicial process in place to determine whether those officers may be armed. However, adding school security personnel has not been shown to improve student safety. A study published in March 2019 found “no evidence that the presence of resource officers in schools lessened the severity of school shooting incidents.”⁶ Earlier studies comparing schools that added School Resource Officers (SROs) and/or School Police Officers (SPOs) to those that did not also found “no evidence suggesting that SRO or other sworn law enforcement officers contribute to school safety” nationwide⁷ and “no notable differences” in rates of reporting of school incidents in Pennsylvania.⁸ Therefore, adding yet another category of personnel who can be armed is unlikely to enhance school safety or security.

Moreover, adding security personnel who do not have the same law enforcement background, training and experience of those personnel already authorized to serve as school security in the School Code is misguided. School security already is a complicated issue; as demonstrated by the training required in the legislation as amended in the Senate, even experienced and trained law enforcement and retired law enforcement need special training and educational programming to serve in the school environment. Adding to the mix third party-supplied security guards without formal law enforcement experience is ill advised.

We appreciate that SB 621 was amended to include certain training for security personnel so that they better understand and are equipped to interact with and serve diverse student populations. However, students, teachers, administrators and parents continue to communicate that investing in additional security measures makes our schools feel more like prisons, rather than places of learning. Indeed, last fall, the Pittsburgh School District considered and rejected a measure to arm its school police officers, who already were “sworn police officers and trained to interact with children.”⁹ As one board member explained:

⁵ <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/enhancing-school-safety-using-threat-assessment-model>

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1054139X18308322>

⁷ Chongmin Na and Denise C. Gottfredson, “Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors,” *Justice Quarterly*, (2011) pp. 1–32, <https://ccjs.umd.edu/sites/ccjs.umd.edu/files/pubs/Police%20Officers%20in%20Schools->.

⁸ Center for Schools and Communities, “School Resource Officer Evaluation, Phase One” September 2005, pp. 68–69.

⁹ Bherman, Elizabeth, “Pittsburgh Schools Board Votes Against Arming District Police,” *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, October 24, 2018 (available at <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2018/10/24/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-board-armed-police-security-Chick-fil-A-marathon-vote-students/stories/201810240116>).

"The issues with school police and guns is something that will drastically change the climate of our Pittsburgh Public Schools and increase the stress and trauma related to that stress of the students that we are there to educate," said board member Kevin Carter, who voted with Ms. Holley and board members Sylvia Wilson, Sala Udin, Lynda Wrenn, Moira Kaleida, Terry Kennedy and Veronica Edwards against arming the school police. "From what I've gathered, there has been no more research, no evidence or empirical data that has been provided to this board on the need to equip our officers with guns."¹⁰

We urge the Committee to focus on investments in our schools that enhance rather than impede the learning process.

There is also a risk that once firearms are introduced in a school, they may be used in circumstances where brandishing or use of a firearm is an inappropriate response. Researchers have suggested that the presence of a firearm may change behavior.¹¹ Recently, a school security guard brandished a firearm and threatened to kill a student after breaking up a fight.¹² But if firearms had not been present, this incident would have almost certainly proceeded along the lines of ordinary disciplinary action. The use of a firearm is clearly unnecessary and inappropriate in nearly all incidents involving teachers and students. However, when firearms are present, low-level incidents can escalate into much more severe confrontations.

We believe SB 621 is misguided in purpose, will not increase student or faculty safety, could impede the learning process, and has the potential to endanger students. Everyone agrees that prevention of the next mass casualty event is a far better option than responding to it. The optimal use of legislative time and resources would be to establish an intelligence network that encourages school districts to focus on student outreach, planning to create and maintain positive school environments for students, teachers, and administrators, and fostering close partnerships with local first responders to ensure coordination in real emergencies.

Finally, although we understand that the legislation is intended only to address security personnel, we believe there is language in SB 621 that could be manipulated by school districts intent on arming teachers as a "security" measure. We urge that any legislation that is enacted about security personnel make abundantly clear that it does not confer any authority on school

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Arlin J. Benjamin, Jr., Sven Kepes, and Brad J. Bushman, "Effects of Weapons on Aggressive Thoughts, Angry Feelings, Hostile Appraisals, and Aggressive Behavior: A Meta-analytic Review of the Weapons Effect Literature," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2017); Arlin James Benjamin, Jr. and Brad J. Bushman, "The Weapons Priming Effect," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 12 (2016): 45-48; David Hemenway, Mary Vrinotis, and Matthew Miller, "Is an Armed Society a Polite Society? Guns and Road Rage," *Accident Analysis & Prevention* 38, no. 4 (2006): 687-695.

¹² David Struett, "School Security Guard Pulled Gun on Student in Dolton, Cops Say," *Chicago Sun Times*, December 6, 2018, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/crime/school-security-guard-gun-dolton/>.

districts to label nonsecurity school staff as "security guards", "school police officers, "school resource officers," or any other category of security staff empowered to be armed on school grounds during school hours.

We urge the Committee to vote no on SB 621.

Thank you for your consideration.

Shira Goodman
Executive Director