

Chairman Browne, Subcommittee Chairwoman Baker, thank you for inviting me to testify before the Senate Appropriation Subcommittee on Health and Human Services' hearing on school safety and mental health services. My name is Ed Bowser and I am the current Superintendent at Forest Hills School District in Cambria County. I have worked in public education for over 37 years as a teacher, guidance counselor, assistant principal, high school principal, director of education and for last the seven years as the superintendent of schools. I guess I could state that I have seen education in general go through a tremendous paradigm shift. Three decades ago when I started as a classroom teacher, schools were seen as a safe haven for a lot of children. It was a nurturing, welcoming environment where students felt safe, received a hot meal, and were provided opportunities to grow and mature educationally and socially into productive citizens.

I have seen a dramatic change in how we do business and the social and emotional responsibilities that have been thrust upon us by society. The lack of parental support, the drug epidemic that has now plagued our area, the lack of spirituality, children being dragged from home to placement shelters have become the norm for a high percentage of our students. Children no longer feel safe, they no longer feel any self-worth and they become angry and frightened. They lack coping skills to deal with the setbacks, so they lash out in violent attacks against their teachers and fellow classmates in school districts such as Columbine, Parkland and last week Santa Fe. Schools have now become targets of violence. In recent years and far too often, they have become war zones where innocent children are senselessly taken away from us.

School boards are now hiring armed school resource officers; constructing mousetrap entrances; developing and implementing lockdown procedures; participating in numerous non-educational professional development activities, such as ALICE training; placing hundreds of security cameras in their buildings; and utilizing screening system such as the RAPTURE software. But

it's still not enough. The carnage continues in our schools. Kids for some reason feel that bringing weapons and guns to school killing their friends and teachers is the answer.

I am here today to tell you we need help! My staff is not trained to handle the psychological needs of some of our kids. I do not have enough professionally trained individuals to handle the social and emotional needs of these children. Our special education numbers, like every public school district in the state, continue to grow, the severity of the disabilities are intensifying, and the lack of appropriate placements are literally nonexistent in our area. Conemaugh Hospital which is located in Johnstown, has closed Aloysius Hall which was the juvenile psychiatric unit in our area. So we were forced to send our children to Pittsburgh and Dubois for hospitalization, further detaching these kids from their parents and loved ones. CYS is overwhelmed and institutions like Presley Ridge are busting at the seams.

Again I am asking, no I am pleading for your help. Because this crisis is not going to go away and it is not going to be solved overnight. It is not one political party's responsibility to resolve. It can no longer be thrust upon our schools to address these student concerns. It has to be a concerted effort by our legislators, elected officials, school districts and mental health facilities. It needs to be sustainable financially from year to year, it needs to be easily accessible and it needs to have properly trained staff to help these kids in crisis. I don't want to ever again have to walk out into my parking lot and find a young man one month away from graduating laying in the backseat of his car next to all of his wrestling trophies with a 357 in his hand. Life is too precious and the taking of one's life or others should never be the solution to their problem. We have find alternatives!

Thank you,

Ed Bowser

Chairman Browne, Subcommittee Chairwomen Baker, I want to personally thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services' hearing on school safety and mental health services. My name is Dr. Mark Kudlawiec, and I am the superintendent of Chestnut Ridge School District located in Bedford County. I have worked in public education for the last 31 years as a teacher, principal, director of vocational education, and superintendent of schools. In the last three decades, I have seen a paradigm shift in education that has changed and not necessarily for the better. Although we still, on a daily basis, try to instill an environment that is nurturing, safe, and judgment-free, we as school districts are asked to do more with less.

In today's society, the school may be the only stable factor that a child has in their lives. In a district that has just under a 50% free and reduced lunch, we feed students breakfast, lunch, and in the after-school program, a snack. Some of these students arrive at our doors at 7:00 am and don't arrive home until 7:00 pm. As a superintendent of schools, I lament for those children; they have nowhere else to go.

Having recently completed my doctorate in education, my dissertation dealt with the perceptions of school violence and threat mitigation in the rural schools of the IU8, this is the IU that my school is part of. The three major risk factor that kept appearing in my study were Fighting/ conflicts, bullying, and drug use. According to Sutor (2014), The Drug Enforcement Administration's Philadelphia Field Division recently released its Analysis of Drug-Related Overdose Deaths in Pennsylvania, 2014 that showed a rate of 31.22 OD deaths per 100,000 people took place in Cambria County last year. That was the third-highest total behind only Philadelphia County and Susquehanna County with respective rates of 41.98 and 33.40. Cambria County is the neighboring county next to Bedford County, and the city of Johnstown is a 30-minute drive from my district.

As I reflect on the previous paragraph, I have to list the areas of fighting, conflict resolution, bullying, and drug use. Why are today's youth struggling in this area? I would say that there are multiple facets to this question. However, I think we have some students that lack coping skills, proper parenting, and a genuine disrespect for human life. It is too easy for a kid to solve a problem with a weapon than trying to talk things out. It is too easy for a child or even a parent to get behind a computer and badger another student or parent for something and think there is no recourse for their actions.

School districts are establishing more safety nets than ever before but, we can't catch everything. We are building mousetraps in our office areas, training staff in areas such as ALICE, are participating in numerous in-service areas that target situational awareness, and purchasing security cameras to help make our schools a safer place to be. According to Lacoé (2012), a safe learning environment is a prerequisite before any learning can take place. However, we can not do this alone; we need your help.

My counselors are not trained professional to counsel students that are chemically dependent on drugs; they are not trained to handle the deep social and emotional needs that these students are bringing to school every day. At one time, we had Aloysius Hall, a psychiatric unit in

Conemaugh hospital where we could send students and families could provide a support factor for them as well. Since the doors at Aloysius Hall have now been closed, we are now forced to send students to Pittsburgh or Dubois for treatment. We need treatment facilities closer to home for these students and families.

In closing, I am asking you to support sustainable funding for the school district to provide the services necessary to, once again, create an educational atmosphere where students feel safe to learn. As a parent of three teenage daughters, I never want to receive that call that one was injured, or worse killed because their school district couldn't provide proper resources to ensure a safe school.

Thank you for your time,

Dr. Mark Kudlawiec

Dear Chairman Browne and Subcommittee Chairwoman Baker,

I would like to thank you for affording me the opportunity to testify before the State Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services' Hearing on Mental Health Issues and School Safety. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story and offer insight on these powerful items. Thank you for considering this testimony.

Mental health issues have become a significant focal point in the planning and operation of the school system. Schools have noticed an increase in the number of mental health cases that need addressed. Unfortunately, mental health issues are not limited to school age students. Often, mental health issues also impact the student's parents and extended families. Often times, mental health issues are manifested in significant explosive outbursts. For the student, this outburst may be displayed in throwing objects, destroying a classroom, emotional and physical episodes directed towards school staff and peers, issues during transportation times, depression, isolation, erratic medical treatment or follow-through, and sometimes displays of personal mutilation including cutting and hitting oneself. Parents and extended family members exhibiting mental health tendencies also present a significant concern for school systems. Often, these adult individuals become irate, hostile, and difficult to manage within a school setting. Instead of protecting the school system from outside threats, sometimes Resource Officers and support staff are charged with de-escalating adults who have attended school meetings or who visited the school. Mental Health placements represent a significant cost for school districts. Some placements can cost as much as \$30,000 per year per child. Recently, the Conemaugh Valley School District raised local effort to the Act 1 Index. It is projected that the anticipated increase in revenue will be utilized to pay for new mental health placements as opposed to addressing significant school needs and educational challenges.

School safety is a primary concern across the Commonwealth. To provide a safe and secure learning environment, the District has trained staff members, utilized a resource officer, and has established positive relationships with local law enforcement and other agencies. As with any aging facility, significant infrastructure changes need to occur to provide school personnel with needed technological and manpower resources. We must be careful to balance the need to be safe and secure with the responsibility to educate students in a friendly learner centered environment. As we increase security measures, we need to make sure that the traditional neighborhood school continues to thrive and grow. Even though schools need to be safe, schools should not resemble correctional facilities. Electronic or spoken threats towards the school is a growing concern. In all cases, these threats must be investigated thoroughly. Often times, these threats require the expenditure of significant resources and are difficult to adjudicate.

The following ideas represent a few possible solutions for your consideration:

- Districts need help reaching families at an earlier age and providing linkages and accessibility to established or newly created outreach programs. We need to invest in families and help the family unit become successful.
- The economic situation surrounding the Greater Johnstown region needs significant support. Gainful employment for local residents would represent a significant victory and offer a sense of hope for families.
- Mental Health issues could be addressed with sustained investment in additional non-academic Guidance Counselors, Social Workers, and the development of mental health treatment facilities.
- Both the Children and Youth Program and the Juvenile Judicial system appear to have significant staffing issues coupled with limited treatment and support options.
- Schools would benefit from sustained fiscal help and technical assistance to support safety upgrades and to maintain resource officers. A possible revenue source would be to look into the costs associated with cyber and charter payments. I am not opposed to competition; however, I question the rates these alternative programs command.

Thank you,

Dr. David Lehman  
Superintendent

**Dr. John W. Zesiger, Superintendent, Moshannon Valley School District, Clearfield County, PA**

Chairman Browne, Subcommittee Chairwoman Baker, thank you for inviting me to testify before the Senate Appropriation Subcommittee on Health and Human Services' hearing on school safety and mental health services. My name is John Zesiger and I am the Superintendent at Moshannon Valley School District in Clearfield County.

Safety is paramount at Moshannon Valley, since 2009, Moshannon Valley has installed security cameras [64 high school and 92 elementary school], installed electronic access entrances and access cards for all staff. In 2013, Moshannon Valley started using armed guards in both the elementary school and high school. In 2015, along with implementing ALiCE protocols, we worked to link our camera system to the Clearfield Emergency Management Center to aid first responders if needed in a crisis situation. The District has invested in secure vestibules, an anonymous tipline, improved communications, and numerous interior and exterior security enhancements.

While we have much in place, features like security guards, metal detectors, radios, and cameras are "day of the event" mechanisms to address violence in school. An incident is planned or worse, in process, when these safety measures need enacted.

Conversely, the District has two guidance counselors, one elementary and one secondary, with caseloads of roughly 480 and 420 students respectively. The required and state-mandated aspects of their positions that focus on state testing, graduation requirements, college and career readiness planning and tracking, student scheduling, maintaining records, and attending meetings for a growing IEP population, to name only a few, limit the time available dedicated to counseling students. Most counseling in school today is reactive, not proactive. Moshannon Valley has experienced eight unexpected parent or guardian deaths and a student death in the past two years, a growing drug and alcohol culture in our county, an exorbitant number of grandparents and extended family members who are tasked with raising our students, and growing foster and homeless student populations. Nearly sixty percent of our District receives free and reduced lunch, up from 36% in 2011. Our psychologist, while wonderful, is contracted and works 1-2 days a week just to keep up with special education evaluations. School safety is more than violent intruders, according to National Vital Statistics System, suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 10-24. Cameras and Guards can't help with that fact. Not everyone recognizes the counselor's impact in preventing negative behaviors.

What I would like to see, and what is needed at Moshannon Valley, are increased school resources to pre-empt these destructive behaviors and tragic events by way of additional counseling and mental health professionals and services. The funding for an additional counselor could be a game-changer in a district like mine, but funding needs to be sustainable, utilized only for counseling and mental health professionals and services, and not just taken from our subsidy with a mandated repurposing.

School-age students, especially from low-income communities like Moshannon Valley are ill-equipped to deal with many of the challenges they face, and the wrong decision can have serious, life-altering effects. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness 20% of 13-18 year olds live with a mental health condition, and 10% have a behavior or conduct disorder. I applaud our legislative leaders for recognizing the pivotal role of the school counselor or social worker in the lives of students, particularly low-income students, who might not have any other caring adult role model in their lives.

Therefore, Moshannon Valley supports additional funding for counseling and mental-health professionals; an integral part of preventing school violence. Trained professionals, who know students individually, build relationships, and more significantly, notice behavioral changes are crucial to school safety. Professionals who understand our students, their interests, worries, and concerns should be the next big focus for Pennsylvania's violence prevention in schools.