

Legislative Plans for School Safety: A Survey of States

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On February 14, 2018, 17 students were killed by a lone attacker at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. This massacre became the second-deadliest incident at an American K-12 school in the past 90 years, surpassed only by the Sandy Hook tragedy of 2012. In the wake of the attack, calls for change echoed across the nation. Politicians, government officials, parents, teachers, and students were once again reminded of the gravity of the need to protect our schools. As in every crisis, many of the loudest voices rising from the aftermath have been the most controversial, but least helpful. However, many states have quietly been doing real work to defend against threats to American children in places of learning. Georgia is one of those states.

In the weeks following the attack at Parkland, the Georgia Senate passed Senate Resolution 935 establishing a study committee to study school safety within the state, chaired by Senator John Albers (R - Roswell), chairman of the Senate Public Safety Committee. Likewise, the House of Representatives passed a similar resolution creating its own school safety study committee. The Senate study committee has met at various locations around the state and has received testimony from school administrators, representatives of state agencies, state and local law enforcement, state and local fire and emergency personnel, students, and teachers, on how Georgia can make its schools safe.

While the committee continues to meet, and will publish a report with its final findings and recommendations by the end of 2018, topics discussed at the meetings of the committee have focused predominantly upon three key fronts.

The first of these pertains to the physical security of school buildings and facilities themselves. In today's world, where athletic facilities, most government buildings, concert venues, airports, and even movie theaters are often heavily secured, schools are facing the difficult and often expensive challenge of constructing new facilities and updating current ones that will thwart safety risks while still maintaining efficient learning environments for students and teachers.

The second topic being examined by the committee is the social atmosphere of Georgia's

Schools. Research consistently shows that while there is no single profile for students who decide to attempt a massacre, those students who do, almost always show warning signs before actually performing an attack. These signs include acting out, exhibiting signs of violence, or even telling family members or other students about their plans beforehand. Unfortunately these threats often go unreported or unrecognized until it is too late. The committee has reviewed extensive testimony relating to the need to foster a more open discourse between students and faculty in order for teachers to identify at-risk students who may be struggling with mental and emotional issues that could potentially contribute to violent behavior and to provide the counseling or even mentoring that may be needed.

The third category being examined by the committee is the need for an effective response in the case of an emergency at a school. Much of the testimony reviewed by the committee has revolved around the need to have a workable response plan in place before an event occurs. During an attack, seconds mean lives, and having an effective plan in place that allows law enforcement, emergency services, and school staff to communicate clearly and work together to neutralize threats while assisting victims is of utmost importance.

Georgia is joined by some other states that are taking similar steps to confront the school safety issue:

Florida

Almost immediately following the Parkland Massacre, Governor Rick Scott signed Senate Bill 7026, establishing the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission to investigate system failures in the Parkland school shooting and other mass-violence incidents and to develop recommendations for system improvements.

This bill also required the Florida Department of Education to establish an evidence-based youth mental health awareness and assistance training program to help school personnel identify and understand the signs of emotional disturbance, mental illness, and substance use disorders in students and to provide school personnel with the skills to help children who are experiencing or developing such problems. The bill also commissioned the creation of an anonymous phone application that will allow students or teachers to report suspicious behavior to authorities.

Additionally, Florida created the Coach Aaron Feis Guardian Program that will allow school districts to place armed school guardians on campuses. These guardians must complete 32 hours of comprehensive firearm safety and proficiency training, 12 hours of diversity training, pass a psychological evaluation and submit to initial and subsequent random drug tests.

Utah

Utah's Safe Schools Commission recently released a report containing several recommendations. One of these recommendations would create Threat Assessment Teams in

every school. These teams would be led by the school principal or an assistant principal and would include a school psychologist, a school counselor, and a resource officer. These teams would identify and analyze potential threats to the student body and seek to prevent the threat from becoming a reality by either notifying proper authorities or providing needed support for at-risk students. Another unique measure recently adopted by the Utah School Board requires schools to conduct a parent and student reunification drill in the event of a school evacuation, in which teachers guide students to pre-determined, off-site venues with color-coded zones.

Texas

In Texas, the Governor's Office released a list of school safety recommendations. These recommendations included one which would revise the state's firearm storage law to include 17-year-olds. Doing so would open parents to civil liability for gun-related crimes committed by their child if the child used a loaded firearm belonging to the parent that was not properly locked up in the home. The Governor's Office also recommended that more "fusion centers" be developed in order to monitor social media for potential threats to schools and students. Texas currently has seven such centers already in action.

Arkansas

Arkansas is considering establishing a system to evaluate threats to students, specifically noting that many threats start or spread on social media. Another measure that more Arkansas districts are adopting allows teachers and staff to carry concealed weapons, which is permissible under an Arkansas law allowing licensed, armed security guards on campus. Districts implementing these policies must require that those volunteering to carry concealed weapons undergo 53 hours of training to be considered guards. These guards are also given a one-time stipend to purchase a handgun and a holster. The district will post signs at each school about the armed guards, but the identities of faculty and staff carrying weapons will be kept secret.

New Hampshire

The governor of New Hampshire commissioned a School Safety Preparedness Taskforce, which released a list of 59 recommendations pertaining to school safety in July of this year. Most notable among these were recommendations for strengthening support for students suffering from mental health issues, the creation of an anonymous tip line for students, parents, and teachers to report suspicious behavior, and for the development of "Best Practices" to be adopted by school districts to adequately prepare against incidents on campuses.

No one wants to believe that an attack like the one that occurred in Parkland, Florida will ever happen in their state, city, or community. Such tragedies are so horrifying that it is often difficult to even think of something like that happening to children close to home. The easiest response to violence in America's schools would be to skirt the issue, refuse to confront it, and hope that nothing ultimately happens. Thankfully though, Georgians may be assured that their leaders are in fact confronting the issue, thinking about the next incident, and working tirelessly to prevent it from happening. – *TB & AE*