

TESTIMONY OF MICAELA CONNERY  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, UNIFIED THEATER

Thank you Sen. Boucher, Rep. Fleischmann, and all the members of this working group for allowing me to speak today. And, more importantly, thank you for quickly convening this Bi-partisan task force as a response to the tragedy in Sandy Hook. I am proud to be a citizen of the state of Connecticut, a state that in the face of conflict and sorrow swiftly moves towards thoughtful dialogue and meaningful action.

I am the founder and Executive Director of a Hartford-based not-for-profit, Unified Theater. We work with almost fifty schools across Connecticut and the country. My work brings me regularly into middle and high schools, urban and rural, large and small, both during and after school hours. As you can imagine, each school is vastly different in their policies for screening outside visitors. I can tell you that it is clear, since Sandy Hook, that policies have been ramped up. I'm having to buzz into schools that have never been locked. Show ID. Pass by police officers. And even this week provide proof that I was in fact a representative of Unified Theater. I commend these efforts. And I encourage your task force to work to standardize school safety protocols. It is more than appropriate and more than necessary to carefully screen every person who walks through our Connecticut school entryways.

I've also heard many discussions post Sandy Hook about panic buttons, bullet proof doors, armed officers, swipe in systems to enter, and other high-level security systems. I urge this working group to recognize that, while these measures may be deemed necessary, school safety is more than cameras and red buttons, more than ID cards and thick glass.

School safety means making our schools a safe and secure place for all students. It means giving our teachers, administrators, and school mental health professionals the tools and support they need to care for and address the needs of their diverse school populations. Research shows that relationships with an adult in their school helps students succeed in and out of the classroom. These kinds of relationships are also where adults find out about potential threats to the school. While in Newtown, violence came from someone outside the school community, the 2002 Secret Service Safe School Initiative findings show that in most cases of school violence, other students are often informed of a possible attack in advance. We need more opportunities for teachers and staff to consistently interact and build relationships with small group of students, the same group from their first day at the school to their last. Conard High School in West Hartford has implemented 4 year teacher advisory groups for all students. These kinds of opportunities, to touch ALL students, not only the highest achieving or the most at risk need to be in all each Connecticut school.

School safety means that each student has somewhere to belong in their schools, where they feel safe and supported. We must continue to provide inclusive after-school and extra curricular opportunities that are welcoming of and accessible for students of all abilities, interests, and backgrounds.

School safety also means supporting (and funding) the outplacement of students with mental illness to residential facilities and other therapeutic settings, for the short or long term, when it's in the best interest of a child. There are times when the school may not in fact be the safest place for a child, and the State of Connecticut needs to recognize and support that.

At other times, the school is the safest place for a child. For some children, their time in school is the most positive and most supportive period of their life. I think particularly about young people in our schools suffering from mental illness. Teachers should be encouraged to retain students who aren't successful in their classes and who may in fact benefit from another year in the supportive space of a public education. We cannot push student through the system, with miraculous passing grades, moving them on and beyond the public schools as fast as possible.

Students with disabilities are in the care of our public schools until the age of 21. Newest research shows that childhood doesn't end at 18. And that the late teen and early twenty years are some of the most vulnerable periods for individuals with mental illness. Can't we provide the same level of support for our children and adolescents with mental illness until the age of 21? Support transition. Connect with students throughout transition with weekly calls and guidance in those crucial first years of post-secondary life. Guide parents on best strategies to meet the needs of their child. Be alerted of possible treats and breakdowns so to be able to inform the right professionals and law enforcement. I imagine what may have been discovered in the Newtown case if there was a public school counselor or staff supporting and checking in on Mr. Lanza and his guardian. We have a precedent here with our public school support of students with disabilities. Mental illness is a disability. Let's extend our support to that population at least through 21. Let's hire more mental health professionals, rather than security personnel.

I fully recognize that these solutions are complex, costly, and may not allow us to see immediate results. I urge this Working Group to think about school safety in the long term. Think about the strategic big picture of how we make Connecticut children safe. Avoid focusing only on short term fixes.

I also ask you as our state legislature to make the difficult decisions about where we spend our state dollars. For the 2012-2013 fiscal year general fund appropriations are budgeted to be \$18.7 billion dollars. 29% of that goes to Human Services. I believe thoughtful legislators can make the right decisions to allocate the necessary funds to support efforts to make our Connecticut students, faculty and administrators safe from gun violence.