

Testimony before the full Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety

Newtown High School

January 30, 2013

My name is Joellen Lawson. I am presenting testimony as:

- 1) A twenty-five year resident of Newtown.
- 2) A former special education teacher and consultant whose twenty-three year career took place in the pre-Columbine era of the 1970's, 80's and 90's. My training included a master's degree in Counseling, another graduate degree in School Health Education as well as certification in Special Education (K-12) and Elementary Education (K-8). During a diverse career, I taught at Riverview Psychiatric Hospital for children in Middletown, CT and ran a town-wide program called "Guided Learning" for students with severe social, emotional and behavioral problems in Fairfield, CT. As a seminar leader, I trained educators how to effectively apply social skills training, cognitive behavior modification, conflict resolution, anger and stress management techniques along with standard behavioral and classroom management to assist at risk students in schools throughout the northeast coast for the American Institute for Creative Education.
- 3) The founder of a nonprofit organization, ConnFESS, the Connecticut Foundation for Environmentally Safe Schools, dedicated to protecting school occupants from short and long-term health hazards caused by mold, pesticides and other sources of indoor air pollution. For over a decade my organization has played a key role in crafting legislative language, promulgating regulations for CT's High Performance Schools and tracking the implementation of school environmental health laws.
- 4) A board member of the Healthy Schools Network, a national 501 © 3 research, information, education and advocacy organization located in Albany, N.Y. that coordinates the national Coalition for Healthier Schools.

Both Governor Malloy's and the legislature's various working groups that are taking on issues of school security must be commended for taking a comprehensive and thoughtful approach. I am glad to have already observed numerous experts testifying regarding the critical importance of mental health intervention because some students suffering from mental illness can present a danger to themselves and others. During my career I worked with numerous students whose emotional, social and behavioral problems presented a significant barrier to being "available to learn". Without addressing such issues these students had no chance of reaching their academic or social potential, let alone becoming a productive member of society.

Each year my organization updates its website, [pollutionfreeschools.org](http://pollutionfreeschools.org), with a summary of CT's school environmental health laws dealing with indoor air quality, green cleaning, pesticides, carbon monoxide detection and school bus idling. One law that we decided was related, but not specifically covered by our mission statement, is PA 07-208, An Act Concerning Security Assessments and Assistance for Schools and Emergency Plans for Schools of Higher Education. Therefore, we have not included it in our annual summaries. In light of recent events we reviewed what this law does and does not do. The act required:

- 1) School districts applying for school construction grants for new schools or major school alterations, extensions, renovations, or replacement to include security infrastructure for any entrances involved in project plans after July 1, 2008.

- 2) Colleges, universities, and private occupational schools to (1) by October 1, 2007, to have emergency response plans and (2) by that date and annually thereafter, submit these plans to the public safety and emergency and homeland security commissioners and local first responders.

Institutions must consult local first responders in developing their plans. Each plan must include a method for notifying the institution's students, employees and visitors of emergency information.

This act also established a grant to improve security infrastructure in schools, install security systems in schools' primary entryways, purchase portable security devices, and train school personnel to use the devices and the infrastructure. To receive a grant a district had to show that it had: (1) Conducted a uniform security system assessment of its school entrances and any security infrastructure; (2) An emergency plan at its schools that had been developed with applicable state and local first responders; (3) Periodically practiced the plan.

In 2007 the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted a study in response to congressional concerns over emergency management in school districts across the country.

Although there are no federal laws requiring all school districts to have emergency management plans, thirty-two states do report having laws or policies requiring schools districts to have emergency management plans. Please see pg. 11, Figure 1 and note Connecticut is not among these states. Table 20 from the GAO report shows that our state had taken advantage of guidance, training and provided some state funding.

This raises the following questions.

- 1) Why were only colleges, universities and private occupational schools required to have emergency response plans and not all public and private schools?
- 2) How many and which school districts participated in the grant program? How many have sustained their emergency response plans after initial funding?
- 3) How many lives were saved because the Newtown school system did participate in this grant program?
- 4) How many schools do and do not currently have emergency response plans in our state?
- 5) What essential components do elementary and secondary school emergency response plans need in order to be effective?

One research objective of the 2007 GAO report was to answer the question: What have school districts done to prepare for emergencies? The GAO obtained information throughout the country by conducting interviews, surveys and site visits. The report concluded at a national level the content of school district emergency plans varies significantly and provided some examples of these variations:

- 1) During site visits procedures varied in the extent to which they ensure the safety of special needs students in an emergency.
- 2) Fewer than half of all school districts have involved the local head of government and the local public health agency in the development of their plans.
- 3) While half of all school districts updated their emergency plans at least once a year, an estimated 10 percent have never updated their plans.
- 4) Most school districts practice their emergency plans annually within the school community. It is estimated over one-quarter of school districts have never trained with first responders and two-

thirds do not regularly train with community partners on how to implement their school district emergency management plans.

Connecticut could benefit from other states' practices and experiences. For example, New York does require all schools to have emergency response plans. One of the most important lessons learned from the 9/11 attacks was that schools must have a viable, carefully considered emergency plan known to parents, teachers and school personnel ready to go on the first day of school. Nearly 6000 children attended the seven public schools located in the World Trade Center impact zone. However, as the attacks occurred so early in the school year, not all emergency response plans were as up to speed as they could have been.

Passage of PA 07-208 was a good first step, I would recommend the following next steps for your consideration:

- 1) Make the development and use of emergency response plans mandatory for all private and public elementary and secondary schools (including CT Technical High Schools).
- 2) Establish essential minimum standards for these plans that can be applied with flexibility and still meet the individual needs of different types of school districts.
- 3) Minimum requirements for school emergency response plans be incorporated into the School Facility Survey (ED050) using a simple yes/no format similar to the section that was added for green cleaning that highlights best practices required by law.
- 4) Integrate an analysis of a new school security section into the next publication of the CT Department of Education report entitled The Condition of Connecticut's Public School Facilities.
- 5) Hold public hearings based on the above mentioned reports of school facilities every three years in order to ensure long-term, ongoing analysis of what is actually occurring in CT school facilities in terms of school security.
- 6) Encourage members of the recently formed School Building Advisory Council charged by PA 11-51 to develop blueprints for new school buildings to seek guidance from school building security experts and avail themselves of resources found on the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities website. FEMA and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security released in April 2012 a manual that provides the design community and school administrators with basic principles and techniques to design a school that is safe from potential physical attacks and simultaneously offers an aesthetically pleasing design that is functional and meets the needs of staff, students, administration and the general public. This manual is a second edition which specifically focuses on threats posed by physical attacks on a school by terrorists or targeted shootings. It can be found at [www.ncef.org/rl\\_assessment.cfm](http://www.ncef.org/rl_assessment.cfm).
- 7) Members of the School Security subgroup become familiar with:
  - a) The National Education Association Health Information Network's School Crisis Guide at <http://www.neahin.org/educator-resources/school-crisis-guide.html>
  - b) IN THEIR OWN WORDS: 9/11 Parents Help Other Parents & Schools with Lessons Learned at [http://www.healthyschools.org/documents/IN\\_THEIR\\_OWN\\_WORDS\\_2005.pdf](http://www.healthyschools.org/documents/IN_THEIR_OWN_WORDS_2005.pdf)
  - c) The National Association of State Boards of Education for state by state summaries of crisis management/ emergency response policies at [http://www.nasbe.org/healthy\\_schools/hs/bytopics.php?topicid=3140](http://www.nasbe.org/healthy_schools/hs/bytopics.php?topicid=3140)

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and for your due diligence as you strive to create effective public policy while grappling with extremely difficult and complex issues.

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