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Testimony of Thomas Kuroski, President

Newtown Federation of Teachers

January 30, 2013

Bi-partisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety

Good evening. My name is Thomas Kuroski, President of the Newtown Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 1727. Welcome to Newtown and thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of our members from Sandy Hook Elementary School and the entire Newtown school district. With your indulgence, I'd like to share the concerns of the educators and school staff of our community with regard to school safety.

The unspeakable violence that was visited on our community just more than one month ago has shaken us all to the core and heightened our sense of vulnerability. It also has compelled us to move with all expediency to focus our collective attention and energy on doing all we can to ensure that our schools are places where teachers can safely educate and nurture our students. The time is now for us to make sure our children are safe and our teachers are supported.

As the elected president of the Newtown Federation of Teachers, my immediate concern in the hours and days following the massacre of 20 students and six adults at Sandy Hook School was for the children and the staff who were in that building—those who heard the sound of bullets and witnessed the carnage. My second concern was for those in schools throughout our district who felt the impact, as buildings were placed on lockdown during and immediately after the shootings.

In addition to the loss of the precious lives of the students, colleagues and friends who perished that day, we also lost our sense of security. All of a sudden, teachers didn't feel we were teaching in a safe environment. All of a sudden, we experienced feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. Many of us no longer felt capable of taking charge of students. For some of us, when we returned to our schools and classrooms, we felt insecure about doing our most sacred duty: teaching and nurturing our students while keeping them safe.

It is unthinkable that any community should endure such a tragedy. Our road to healing and a restored sense of normalcy will be long and littered with

uncertainties. One thing, however, is certain: all of us—teachers, parents, school administrators, elected officials and our students—must have a seat at the table in discussions around school safety what it will take to restore a sense of security for the children and adults in our schools.

As we continue to heal and to talk about the best ways to move our school district forward, it is imperative that we continue to keep lines of communications—between school administrators, teachers and parents—open and honest. I am encouraged by the spirit of cooperation evidenced over the past few weeks following a meeting between our union, schools superintendent Dr. Janet Robinson and school board chair Debbie Leidlein. Following the recommendations of the Newtown Federation of Teachers, the school board has given discretion to individual building leaders to reallocate time for Professional Learning Communities –time that was set aside to address curriculum development—to Professional *Healing* Communities, that center around how best to serve the immediate and ongoing needs of teachers and staff as we, too, struggle to grapple with the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shootings.

It is my sincere hope that, as we move forward, we all continue to come together as a collective, as a community. If educators have a voice, we feel safer and more confident in our ability to teach, nurture and protect our students.

School Safety Recommendations and Best Practices

Together with our state and national affiliates, AFT Connecticut and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Newtown Federation of Teachers welcomes the opportunity to submit recommendations and best practices to the Subcommittee on school safety. We wish to focus on the elements of an effective school safety plan based on the experience of our affiliates–in particular that of our New York state affiliates.

For more than twelve years, our union has played an active role in the development and passage of state legislation on school safety. In those states where we have had input, we have promoted a comprehensive and expanded approach to school safety. In our experience, we have learned that comprehensive state legislation is essential, but not enough, to ensure the effective implementation of school safety plans in every school. Successful adoption of a comprehensive plan requires a commitment at every level—the state, the district and all school settings.

Furthermore, we have learned that adoption and implementation of a successful school safety plan requires the genuine participation of all stakeholders at every level. Only then will school safety plans be routinely practiced and embraced by everyone in the school community.

Our experience in New York State serves as an example. The AFT and its affiliates, the New York State United Teachers and the United Federation of Teachers, have actively sought reasonable and effective solutions to school safety challenges in school districts throughout the state. Through our efforts,

New York City and other school districts—large and small—began to formulate promising school safety programs. Our hard work and effort are reflected in the approach taken in the *New York State SAVE* (Safe Schools Against Violence in Education) law that was enacted in 1999. This law remains one of the most comprehensive school safety laws in the country. Our state affiliate, the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) and our largest affiliate, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City were key to ensuring that the scope of the legislation was comprehensive and applicable to schools in all settings—rural urban, large and small. The highlights of the legislation include:

- The requirement that every school district in the state develop a comprehensive safety plan that includes, among other things, policies and procedures for:
    - Prevention and intervention strategies such as
        - Training for security personnel
        - Evidence-based methods to respond to threats and acts of violence;
    - School building security;
    - Annual school safety training for staff and students;
    - The development of strategies to improve communication among students and staff ;
    - Dissemination of materials regarding early detection of potentially violent behaviors; and
    - Description of duties of hall monitors and other school safety personnel.
- Building-level Emergency Response Plans. **Plans are to be developed, implemented and monitored by a team or safety committee.** The committee must include teachers, staff, administrators, parent organizations, school safety personnel, community members, law enforcement and emergency response agencies. The plans must be detailed and include:
    - An ICS (incident command system) and a designated emergency response team;
    - Internal and external communication system; and
    - Procedures to review and conduct drills and exercises.
- Codes of conduct that apply to teachers, students, personnel and visitors;
- Stricter penalty for assaulting teachers, from Class A misdemeanor to Class D felony;
- Child abuse reporting;
- Whistle-blower protection; and
- Finger-printing of employees.

Since the passage of SAVE, school bullying prevention legislation and regulation have been adopted that complement the original school safety law.

Bullying prevention now has been added to the overall approach.

This law has been effective in all school districts in New York State —from small school districts to large urban school districts, even though some continue to be in only partial compliance with the law due, most likely, to lack of training and support.

The New York City public schools and the United Federation of Teachers have demonstrated how this law can protect students and staff and prevent their exposure to security risks. Among other things, in NYC, practices in place include:

- A mandated violence prevention program that every teacher and paraprofessional is required to complete; it includes two hours of training in school violence prevention and intervention in accordance with New York state Education law. The training provides skills on recognizing the signs of a violence prone individual.
- Written school safety plans in every school with clear direction on evacuation, shelter-in and lockdown procedures and the chain of command with contact information. Also plans must address the evacuation of limited mobility students.
- School Safety committees at every school. Committees routinely review and revise the school safety plan. Committees are mandated to meet monthly to discuss safety issues and analyze data to improve the plan. Members of the committee include:
    - The principal;
    - A Union representative;
    - A school safety agent;
    - Parent association president;
    - Building response team leader;
    - Local policy precinct representative; and
    - Local fire department representative.
- School Safety walkthroughs and audits by trained personnel and/or committee members to examine entrances and exits; check fire alarms doors and extinguishers check arrival and dismissal procedures and evaluate class-to-class transitions.
- Anti-bullying programs to address student bullying, bias-based harassment and sexual harassment. In New York City, there is at least one point person for reporting of bullying and harassment offenses. The UFT has created its own program that provides some services and mental health referrals for students and their families.

An important plan component in New York City, as well as the state, is accurate record-keeping and investigations after incidents. Accurate records and investigations will provide the data to improve school safety plans and to make them even more effective.

According to David Kazansky, the UFT Director of Safety, based on his experience, "It is without question that the safety of a school community requires the involvement of the entire community. It is often found that the safest schools are the ones that have close ties to community groups in the area; good working relationships with first responders, such as firefighters and police; a parent community that is constructively involved and trained in safety; and those schools that employ an open-door policy when it comes to the topic of keeping every adult and child in the school safe."

Implementation is a work in progress. We know now as we look back on the implementation of New York SAVE that schools that have adopted all, or even parts, of the law have reduced rates of violence, and better mitigation and recovery after an event has occurred.

The New York SAVE law is not perfect, but it is a significant step towards attaining the goal of safe and secure schools. At this point, AFT urges more federal and state support for schools to promote the comprehensive approach in place in New York state. In addition to mandates such as those in New York State SAVE, we recommend additional initiatives including:

- Resources to develop or expand the capacity of school districts and school committees. Without resources, smaller school districts will have difficulty training key security personnel, school safety committee members, school personnel and students. Smaller school districts also may be hard-pressed to invest in equipment, hardware and the capitol improvements necessary to boost security.
- Funding and guidance on integrating building security design into major capitol improvement plans and new school design and construction.
- Better monitoring by the state to ensure adherence to school safety laws, as well as consistent and accurate reporting to the state.
- Inclusion of teachers and all school staff in a workplace violence prevention standard similar to the one promulgated by the federally certified New York state plan OSHA for public employees – PESH (Public Employees Safety and Health) administration.

Our members are deeply concerned about the gaps in school safety programs. When students don't feel safe, when staff don't feel safe, everyone suffers academically, socially and emotionally. We stand ready to work with districts, states and the federal government to make safety and security a daily reality for every student and adult that enters a school.

Addendum to Testimony by Thomas Kuroski, President

Newtown Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 1727

Earlier this month, elected union representatives from each of the seven school facilities in the Newtown Public School District asked teachers and school staff about safety concerns in their facilities. The following are highlights of their feedback.

Hawley Elementary School

- Outside doors do not close properly.
- Downstairs windows, which need to be open in warm weather, are accessible from the outside.
- No security cameras.
- Classroom doors only lockable from the outside and the handles are not heavy duty.
- Front doors in the original [1921] building are wood, and easily breached.
- Access to driveway is a concern [Susan is not sure in what way]
- Back field is wide open and easily accessible
- Evacuation route is over rough terrain and is NOT handicap accessible
- "Safe" place in evacuation is NMS. If NMS is in lockdown, Hawley has no place to go.
- System for buzzing in has just a small fuzzy camera window – can't really see who it is.
- Radios [?] not strong or clear.
- Police presence is temporary.

Head O'Meadow School

- Locks on all doors need to be changed so they can be locked from the inside.
- Windows need to be covered; drop cloths are in place now.
- All staff members need keys.
- All EAs and subs need access to keys.
- All staff agreed that all security officers or resource officers need to be armed, or police officers.
- Camera and buzz-ins should be conducted initially, but the administrative assistant, then by a trained police or security officer.

Newtown Middle School

- Restricted access to building. [?]
- Audit has not taken place.
- Replace locks so they lock from the inside.
- Teachers can only enter through three doors [some are VERY far from classrooms].
- "Card swiper" entry needed in several locations.

- Protocol needed for after-school programs and activities, including non-school activities.
- We cannot stress enough the balance between safety and harming students psychologically (cannot be a fortress or a prison)
- Will interior keys work on closets?
- Can't open windows or doors, no air conditioning at NMS.
- All 1st floor windows at Middle School problematic
- Easy way to cover windows on doors
- Concern about doors going in to the classrooms (strength of the door and of the window inside it)
- Media center glass, easy access.
- Reentry to the building for students outside (either during a fire drill or classes outside for PE)
- Phone system needs to be replaced
- NMS frequent false alarms due to dust
- School's evacuation site has been posted in the paper
- Evacuation route signs should be taken down
- Feasibility or replacing some glass windows with bullet proof glass
- Protocol for opening doors after a lockdown
- Need for improved teacher communication during lock down.

Newtown High School

- Outside doors, problems with access with key fobs.
- Lack of clear lockdown procedures.
- Teachers don't have keys to every room.
- Need shades on door windows, blinds on outside windows.
- Lockdown procedures unclear for open areas such as cafeteria.
- People feel that administration is unwilling to listen to safety concerns.
- Staff want a continued police presence.

Middle Gate School

- No keys to lock cafeteria or library
- Gym is across from the front door entrance. For assembly, it houses 250 at a time.
- Some areas of the school cannot hear announcements.
- Keys only lock one's own door in the building.
- During recess and outside gym, not everyone has a walkie talkie.
- Bathrooms inside of classrooms do not have locks on the doors.

Reed Intermediate School

- In the morning the front and rear doors of the building are unlocked and unsupervised.
- Unlocked doors on the interior. [?]
- Classroom doors and exterior windows do not have shades.
- Classroom doors do not lock from the inside.
- Extra keys needed for subs and EAs, which teachers have had to go out and get. [Susan says this seems like more than a security issue!!!]
- Lack of ability to hear announcements and communication inside the building.
- NO protocol for entering the building in the morning or afternoon.
- Exterior doors do not shut and lock on their own.
- There is no clear lockdown procedure, and no drill has been held this year.

Sandy Hook School

- No real concerns, though we have talked about a low-key walk-through of fire drill and lockdown procedures for teachers and students [teachers first, without kids], because it's a new building and they are not familiar with it.