



### **Comprehensive Message on School Safety**

Mental health and school safety professionals in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania join the nation in grieving over the most recent school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Firearm violence along with its related deaths among our youth is a notable problem in Pennsylvania. Based on data from a 2016 examination of firearm mortality by the National Center for Health Statistics at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the average rate of death by firearm is slightly higher in Pennsylvania (12.0 per 100,000 people) compared to the rest of the country (11.8). This places Pennsylvania 5<sup>th</sup> in the ranking of states by total number of firearm related deaths, and 30<sup>th</sup> in the ranking of states by mortality rate. Even more concerning, according to the Center for Injury Research and Prevention, almost half of the firearm-related injuries in Pennsylvania affect children and young adults age 25 and younger.

This tragic incident in Parkland was yet another addition to the heart-rending narrative of gun violence in America's schools. Now more than ever, we must work together to more effectively prevent future firearm violence in our schools across the nation and in Pennsylvania. Schools play a critical and irreplaceable role in keeping students safe. Violence prevention in schools requires a comprehensive approach that improves school climate, makes the physical school environment safer, and prioritizes educating students not only in academics, but in social skills as well. We can work toward the goal of making our schools safer by ensuring sufficient staffing of well-trained mental health providers in our schools, sharing safe messages in the media, and developing more effective gun legislation.

#### **Need for School Psychologists**

Readily available mental health services in schools promote school safety by providing the system-wide supports that enhance school climate, improve student learning, and build student resilience. Mental health services include a range of prevention and teaching activities, including promoting wellness, teaching pro-social behaviors, and sharing strategies for help-seeking behaviors.

Few school psychologists are lucky to be in a position of having the recommended ratio of 500:1 students per school psychologist. Based on data gathered by the National Association of School Psychologists in 2011, the average ratio in Pennsylvania is 1,403 students to 1 school psychologist. This excessive ratio is equivalent to a classroom ratio of 47 students per teacher (based on a recommended ratio of 30 students to 1 teacher).



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With such high ratios, school psychologists are often limited to the role of assessing students for exceptionality. This prevents school psychologists from being able to provide more preventive, comprehensive services provided in the practice model for school psychological services, which enhance behavioral and mental health, while reducing violence in schools. The comprehensive school psychologist role includes (a) consultation and collaboration with students, staff, and families; (b) interventions and mental health services to help students build social skills; (c) preventive and responsive discipline practices; (d) school-wide strategies to promote learning; and (e) data-based decision-making and accountability.

### ***School Psychologists as Consultants with Students, Staff, and Families***

School psychologists have the skills and training to work with individual students to provide culturally responsive counseling and to coordinate social skills training. By making connections with individual students, school psychologists can effectively prevent and respond to student suicide and violence. In addition to working directly with students, school psychologists consult with teachers to support positive class-wide behavior management and with parents to facilitate home-school communication and collaboration. With consultation provided by school psychologists, children and adolescents who have mental health problems or problem behaviors can demonstrate improvements and experience more success in school.

### ***School Psychologists as Implementers of Systems-Wide Prevention***

Effective school safety efforts require positive school climates that facilitate trusting relationships and do not rely solely on punitive discipline practices. Strong evidence underscores the effectiveness of tiered levels of supports in schools. Systems-wide positive approaches to discipline at the universal level of supports are highly effective in reducing problem behaviors and improving school climate. As experts in data collection and interpretation, school psychologists are well prepared to lead efficient and effective data-based decision making and problem solving in schools. School psychologists coordinate systematic screening efforts to identify students with behavioral or mental health concerns. For students who are identified to be at higher risk based on universal screening, mental health staff in schools, including school psychologists, can provide appropriate, evidence-based early intervention. For students with more severe needs, school-based mental health providers can provide more targeted and intensive supports. As experts in youth behavioral and mental health, school psychologists are also able to provide professional development to school staff, parents, and community members on the prevention and reduction of student behavior problems.



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## ***School Psychologists as Responders to Crises***

School crisis prevention and intervention planning and training should reinforce students' and staff members' effective behavior in the event of an emergency, improve collaboration between the school team and emergency responders, and align with ongoing school safety and violence prevention efforts. School psychologists are uniquely trained to respond effectively to school crises. School psychologists receive training in crisis prevention and management, such as the PREP<sub>a</sub>RE professional development training, which enhances school safety and crisis management plans and emergency response procedures (<https://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum>). In addition, school psychologists lead and participate in school safety and crisis teams, and they coordinate safety prevention and response with school resource officers and community police. School psychologists are also trained to assist with recovery for students and staff in response to a crisis.

## ***Accessing School Psychologists: Administrative Support and Training Needs***

As the frequency and intensity of school violence are rapidly escalating, it is of utmost importance that school-based school psychologists engage in providing comprehensive mental health services. To that end, administrators at the school and district levels must advocate for this comprehensive role for their school psychologists.

Currently, there are too many unfilled school psychology positions in school districts across Pennsylvania. Outsourcing mental health professionals is not the answer. School-employed, state certified mental health providers are uniquely positioned to be well-informed and supportive of schools' students, staff, and families. As members of the school community, school-employed professionals are also able to develop strong school-community partnerships with community mental health agencies and law enforcement officials. Such partnerships are lacking among outsourced providers.

The first step to filling positions is to ensure that graduate students in training programs can find internship programs. There are limited opportunities for paid school-based school psychology internships in Pennsylvania compared to other states. Ohio, for example, has a standing \$2.5 million state budget item to fund school psychology trainees for full-time internship positions. This funding is intended to support 100 interns per school year (Ohio Department of Education, 2014). The second step to filling positions is to increase the appeal of positions in districts located in more remote areas. Considerations for supporting remote, rural school districts in filling school psychology positions include: (a) coordinating with local universities to offer high quality practicum and internship



sites; (b) augmenting the school budget for school psychologist salaries in rural areas; and (c) ensuring competitive salary and benefits packages to recruit and retain high quality school psychologists. To increase the retention of well-trained school psychologists and reduce high ratios of students to providers, a third step is to increase funding for school psychology positions in Pennsylvania's schools.

### **Need for Safe Messages in Media**

One of the primary challenges in crisis response is to responsibly disseminate information about school shootings to reduce the likelihood of the “copycat effect.” From the basics of social learning theory, it is well understood that children and adults alike learn how to behave based on what they observe. Highly prevalent media coverage of violence provides ample opportunities for youth to learn violent behavior.

Media messaging must be more responsible to reduce the likelihood of increased violence. The Colorado School Safety Resource Center outlines important tips for safe media messaging. These tips for media messages are to (a) avoid glorifying crimes; (b) report facts without qualifying the events as “successes” or “failures”; (c) identify ways in which the shooter could have instead accessed mental health supports; and (d) refrain from providing the shooter with attention and “fame” by sharing personal details about the shooter.

### **Need for More Effective Gun Legislation**

Any approach to addressing school violence would be remiss to only include school mental health legislation. Gun violence statistics in the U.S. are staggering. Rates of gun violence are ten times higher in the U.S. than in other high-income countries. Two million children and youth have access at home to unlocked and loaded guns. This exposure to gun violence can negatively impact students' mental health, behavior, and learning.

Pennsylvania needs gun laws that restrict access to high-powered, automatic weapons. Access to high-powered weapons is a known risk factor for homicidal and suicidal behavior. Effective laws and policies must keep guns away from children and adults who might harm themselves or others, limit access to weapons intended to cause mass destruction in a short amount of time, and make sure that the only people armed in schools are trained police and resource officers. Though guns themselves are not the sole cause of school violence, the availability of guns to youth with emotional behavioral disorders and mental health problems poses a serious safety risk.

Schools need trained professionals who can help to defend students and staff against shooters, but arming teachers is not the answer. Following the Sandy



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Hook school shooting, the Center for Homicide Research examined the effectiveness of existing school district policies that placed firearms in the hands of teachers. Arming teachers harms school climate and increases the likelihood of death or injury. Moreover, providing access to guns in schools dramatically increases the possibility of accidental shootings by teachers or students. In the chaos of responding to an active shooter, even well-trained police are only successful in shooting the perpetrator some of the time. Furthermore, placing guns in schools provides easier access to weapons by students with emotional behavioral disorders and mental health issues.

A position statement developed by school violence prevention experts in 2012 outlined the need for multiple interventions to address school shootings: (a) enhance physical security (e.g., locked doors, buzzer entrances); (b) build universal, positive behavior support approaches across the school community to improve school climate; (c) develop strong educational and extracurricular programs; and (d) provide evidence-based instruction to promote positive social, emotional, and behavioral development.

Arming teachers negatively impacts school climate and makes schools less safe, which directly contradicts the overwhelming evidence that positive school climates make schools safer. Educators need the support of school-based mental health providers to employ more universal approaches that improve school climate and teach students social skills and pro-social behavior, not firearms.

Safety in our schools has become a complex, ever-growing problem. The unique training and talents of school psychologists must not be overlooked as we seek solutions to this crisis in our state and across the country.



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## Related Resources

- Framework for Safe and Successful Schools,  
<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/a-framework-for-safe-and-successful-schools>
- Resolution on Efforts to Prevent Gun Violence,  
<https://www.nasponline.org/x40582.xml>
- Statement: Preventing Mass Violence Requires Access to Mental Health Services and Reduced Access to Firearms,  
<https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/media-room/press-releases/preventing-mass-violence-requires-access-to-mental-health-services-and-reduced-inappropriate-access-to-firearms>
- Statement: NASP Opposes Arming Teachers,  
<https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/media-room/press-releases/nasp-opposes-arming-teachers>
- School Crisis Prevention and Intervention: The PREPaRE Model,  
<https://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum>
- Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/best-practice-considerations-for-schools-in-active-shooter-and-other-armed-assailant-drills>
- Media Outreach Through Newspapers,  
[https://www.nasponline.org/assets/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/media\\_ps.pdf](https://www.nasponline.org/assets/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/media_ps.pdf)
- Effective Communications Messaging for School Psychologists,  
<http://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/advocacy-tools-and-resources/communications-strategies-and-resources/effective-communications-strategies>
- School Psychology Advocacy Resources <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/advocacy-tools-and-resources/general-advocacy-resources>



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