

Senate Education Committee Hearing
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Written Testimony

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The tragic event occurring in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, had a horrifying effect on people throughout the country. The Blue Mountain School District, like other school districts, began a review of their safety features and practices. I want to initially state that none of us, Board Members, Administrators, Teacher or Staff, thought that we could find ultimate security. The very nature of school district operations exposes people to situations that can be potentially lethal. For example, if you drove around the Commonwealth today, you will see students embarking from buses to enter buildings, you will find elementary children outside at recess and you will find secondary students on outdoor playing fields during physical education. Unless we revert to a garrison state and eliminate such traditional aspects of schooling, we will always face a degree of exposure to potential harm. However, it was also our belief that we could take steps to mitigate any potential harm; hence, we, Board and Administrators, began a series of discussions to formulate a plan to deter potential intruders on school property.

Among the ideas studied, and eventually adopted, were staff training, facility security and building modifications. However, those steps are beyond the topic of today's discussion; instead we will focus on our decision to train and arm two staff members to serve as security personnel. There were two guiding precepts that served as the foundation for this decision. First, we hoped, and continue to hope, that this will serve as a deterrent. Second, if an armed intruder enters a building or our grounds, armed personnel may be able to eliminate a threat or reduce the extent of harm. With a district our size, 126 square miles, we know that the two security people (who also hold other duties) could not be everywhere but the fact that a potential intruder does not know where they may be could deter a potential shooter. Therefore, we went forward with the training.

The first step of training was to send our two designated security personnel to a security seminar at Penn State, which was hosted by the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI and the Pennsylvania State Police. The topics presented included psychological profiles of shooters and deterring school shootings. What our people learned was that shooters do not want to face some person who possesses equal force and has the capability of taking their life/lives. In short, the intruder wants to maintain control. Following the seminar our two designated security officers engaged in information gathering from law enforcement agencies. The next step called for fingerprinting, a psychological profile/test, a physical examination, which included hearing and eyesight. After a successful completion of the above, they received a letter of approval from the Pennsylvania State Police Commission to attend a training academy.

The final stage of our preparation for implementation was to have the security people attend the Law Enforcement and Training Academy which is certified by the Pennsylvania State Police. The academy was an intensive five-day program that covered topics and procedures such as crime code, weapons retention and shooting qualifications under varied conditions. Thus the training was completed and we prepared for implementation. It should be noted that the two trained security people are authorized to perform police powers on school ground, i.e. arrest. They also have the authority to work with police agencies on campus.

Since the implementation of the program, which was in the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, the two security personnel have established a routine procedure. As written above both men hold other district positions; specifically, Director and Assistant Director of Facilities but they devote the beginning and close of each day to monitoring buildings. They also patrol the grounds and conduct building walkthroughs. However, of greatest importance is the fact that they are available if and when an emergency arises. District personnel have been directed to dial 911 first if they perceive a threat; the second call is to be made to our security.

One question that we are often asked is about the public response to arming two staff members. We actually faced very limited opposition. Two people attended our board meeting to express concern and that was the limit of opposition. Although we did not conduct a survey, many community members made, and continue to make, positive comments. Nor did we have any opposition from our insurance carrier.

Fortunately, we have not had any serious situations that required the two security men to use their weapons but they did respond to a parental threat at one of our elementary buildings.

In summation, we, as a district, are pleased with this security structure. It is our belief that it does serve as a deterrent.

Thank you.