



**CSSRC Remarks**  
**School Safety Interim Committee**  
**August 20, 2019**

Good Morning and thank you for this opportunity to address this school safety interim committee. I am Chris Harms, the Director of the School Safety Resource Center within the Department of Public Safety. I want to apologize for not being able to attend the July meeting and thank my supervisor, Kevin Rants, the Chief Administrative Officer of CDPS for doing such a wonderful job of presenting in my stead.

I have, however, listened to all five and half hours of the testimony from last time and I agreed with so many of the comments of the committee members. I was heartened to hear that legislators as voiced by Sen. Gonzales, were pleasantly surprised at the vast amount of school safety work that has been done by state agencies, non-profit groups as well as the schools themselves. School safety has truly been in the forefront of the thoughts and actions of so many people here in Colorado since the tragedy at Columbine. However, I also wish that we had been able to prevent the tragedies that have happened since, so we continue to work every day to accomplish that.

I agreed with the statement by Rep. Sirota that what is happening in our schools is a reflection of our society. And therefore, we can't expect the schools to fix the problems alone. I was especially riveted by the testimony of the educators last time. The first grade teacher who over 28 years has seen an increase in children coming to school with trauma from approximately three students per year when she started teaching, to all students in her class needing extra support now. The Berthoud High School teacher who reported not having lost any students last year for the first time in years, attributed that to the hiring of a school social worker and the subsequent dismissal of that much needed professional.

Senator Lundeen asked, "What is gaining us ground and how do we bring those successful projects to scale?" I believe the answer to this and the ability to provide the resources for these answers will take us far in making Colorado schools some of the safest in the nation.



As I am sure you realize now, school safety is a broad entity that covers a myriad of topics. Perhaps I am a simpler thinker than most, but I like to break it down into two large categories: physical safety and psychological safety. So looking at what is working and thinking about bringing those projects to scale means looking at the many different facets of school safety.

**Let me start with physical safety:**

I have to say that the 2018 School Security Disbursement Grant funding helped many of our districts address much needed school security measures. The \$29.5 million allowed schools to install ballistic film on windows, reinforce entry ways, secure access control systems and cameras and even simple things like fencing around playgrounds and locks for classroom doors. I would love to see a simple push button lock on every classroom door in Colorado schools as Denver just did because as far as I know, we have not lost a single student to a school shooting in the United States who has been behind a locked classroom door. However, the ask from districts was \$60 million, twice the amount available.

I know Rep. Beckman highlighted the idea of building, grounds and community physical security assessments last time. The School Safety Resource Center has a staff member who can conduct those physical assessments for any schools within the state. The local emergency managers, that every county in Colorado have, will also do those assessments as well the Region 8 Office of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. All a school need do is ask and there is no charge for those services.

But as you can imagine, what each district and their schools need for physical safety will vary greatly from place to place. That is why the 2018 Disbursement grant was so helpful as schools requested exactly what they needed.

**In terms of psychological safety,** I believe the testimony you heard in July was spot on in telling you what is working and what schools need. They need resources and specifically as mentioned by Rep. Michaelson-Jenet, Rep. Sirota and Senator Fields, they need resources to create positive school climates including trauma sensitive classrooms, curricula that support social emotional learning and more mental health professionals.



The ACLU published a report in March of 2019 that highlighted the number of schools across the country that had law enforcement professionals but no mental health professionals. I appreciated Sen. Fields requesting the research on the effects of having law enforcement officials in the schools as the research is conflicting. That is probably because unless you are comparing professionals that have been similarly trained, you will get differing outcomes as to their effectiveness. Colorado has passed legislation that requires SROs to complete the P.O.S.T. recommended 40 hours of training from the National Association of School Resource Officers. However, whether or not an officer chooses to be an SRO also makes a huge difference. Some law enforcement agencies ask for volunteers to request assignments as SROs where in other agencies they are simply assigned. Therefore, whether or not they feel comfortable working with students can vary greatly as well.

So in some circumstances, would an SRO contribute to the school to prison pipeline? I am sure the answer to that is yes. But in other circumstances, an SRO may contribute to a very positive school climate that prevents the school to prison pipeline and prevents violence from happening in that school. Training for both the officers and the school administrators make the difference along with choosing the right officers in the first place.

To the second part of that ACLU study, Colorado continues to struggle to match the recommended ratio for mental health professionals in our schools while the number of student suicides continues to rise. According to the study:

School Counselors: 250:1 - Colorado 503:1

School Social Workers: 250:1 - Colorado 2,258:1

School Psychologists: 700:1 – Colorado 1,578:1

School Nurses: 750:1 – Colorado 2,853:1

I know this continues to be addressed by the School Health Professionals grant and schools have very much appreciated the funding, but Colorado still has a long way to go to match the national recommendations.



**Between the last meeting in July and today's session, I was asked to compile a list of state agencies that touch school safety in any way.** I prepared that list with the assistance of other state staff and shared it with the Governor's office and I share it here today. Because school safety covers such a multitude of topics, it touches 6 state departments and a university. However, I have asked to be allowed to put this in context as it may be interpreted either as duplicating services or collaborating in a way that optimizes resources and utilizes the best expertise to address various components of an issue. I strongly believe it is the later.

For instance: when we look at the issues of suicide prevention. You will see that four different agencies address this in some way for schools: The CSSRC has organized school safety symposia for schools as we have the staff and funding to pull together a regional training. We also will train schools in creating a strategy to address suicide as well as an online course on the subject for teachers and the Center facilitates a working group to look at the suicide assessment tools used in our schools.

In the past, CDE has had some grant funds that could appropriately be used to pay for national speakers at these symposia. The Attorney General's office has been willing to pay for printing materials for the symposia and has provided grant funding for schools. The Office of Suicide Prevention has assisted with finding those national speakers and also applying for SAMSHA funding to support suicide work in the schools. It has taken all the partners to address this issue as no one agency has the bandwidth to do it all. However, the collaborations have led to a number of grant programs to provide suicide prevention curricula in many school districts utilizing a consistent evidence-based program and eleven suicide symposia over the last 10 years. I think that demonstrates the strength of state office collaborations.

One final subject that was mentioned at the last meeting that I also agree with and I would like to address was brought up by Senator Fields. That is the lack of resources to respond after a crisis. Traditionally, when an incident has occurred on a school campus, multiple law enforcement jurisdictions are called in to assist



during the crisis. As long as everyone is following incident command, this usually works well.

But it is the psychological recovery that has relied on teams from the school or campus that is impacted as well as the generosity of neighboring school districts to send mental health professionals to assist. I am sure all the schools that have received help from neighboring districts have been grateful, but is this really the best case scenario after a major event? To assist those professionals from other districts, the Colorado Society of School Psychologists' volunteer crisis response team has sometimes been called in as well. Although staffed by excellent, experienced professionals these are retired people who offer to help, if they are available. In other cases, schools have had to hire outside agencies to help with the recovery process.

There is no state agency established and trained to provide crisis response services to a school in the aftermath of an event and provide consultation as to how best to recover. Schools need a trained, multi-disciplinary team to help with recovery so that the schools can get back to the business of education. Even the School Safety Resource Center does not have a mandate to provide these services nor trained staff available at the present time to respond in this way. I agree with Sen. Fields that this is a gap.

I appreciate the hard work of this committee as understanding the breadth of school safety is no easy task. The office of the School Safety Resource Center is happy to assist in any way that we can and I would be happy to answer any questions. Thank you!