

LWVOR Education Committee Report

School Security

Last year the education committee studied school security, among other topics, which was included in the Local Program for 2013-2014. We found that since the horrific shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012, a number of dominant trends in school security have emerged as state governments and local school districts have attempted to insure student safety.

On the federal level, political special interest groups have hijacked school security issues to promote their own agendas. Gun control groups have used school security as a basis for pushing new laws on gun control, while gun rights advocates have used school security as an argument for arming teachers, school staff and volunteers. The result at the federal level has been gridlock, with no new federal moves to restore funding cut from security, policing or emergency preparedness programs.

As a result, states and local school districts have been left to devise their own enhanced security programs. These may be roughly grouped into the following categories: 1) School Emergency Planning, 2) Arming School Employees, 3) Building Safety Upgrades 4) Placing Police in Schools, 5) School Climate and Student Support Services, 6) Easing Gun Restrictions, 7) Tightening Gun Control.

1) School Emergency Planning: Numerous states have initiated legislation which establishes emergency plans for public schools and recommends changes to improve security. Education Week magazine analyzed 450 bills related to school security across the country which were introduced between December 2012 and December 2013.ⁱ The study found that 178 dealt with school emergency planning. Of these 45 were enacted into law. These bills “require schools or districts to conduct emergency drills, update or create emergency plans or otherwise deal with emergency planning measures.” Tennessee got ahead of this issue when the legislature passed the Schools Against Violence in Education (SAVE) Act in 2010. While TN Legislators introduced six bills in 2013-14 which dealt with emergency planning, the only one signed into law was SB 1249 which requires the TN Education Commissioner to report annually to the state Commissioner of Safety and the School Resource Officers Association on the implementation of the Schools Against Violence in Education Act.

2) Arming School Employees: Across the country state legislatures advanced legislation and/or tweaked existing laws to allow teachers or support staff to carry firearms. While these proposals have gained majority support in state legislatures, most schools have opted out of allowing teachers and staff to carry weapons. In Tennessee, HB06 passed and was signed by the governor in 2013. The law allows school personnel to carry weapons if they have a handgun permit, are authorized to do so by the school superintendent, have forty hours of basic school policing training and use frangible bullets.ⁱⁱ

3) Building Safety Upgrades: Twenty-seven states introduced bills which proposed to provide money for grants to enhance building security. School districts, seizing the opportunity to get state funds, have installed camera systems, alarms,

metal detectors, visitor identification equipment, and building access restrictions. Unfortunately, in some cases, these systems require training to operate and money to maintain and replace. Without ongoing monetary support, these systems may become useless. Additionally, vendors, seeing the opening market for building security equipment, have sold excessive or inappropriate equipment to the school systems. In the 108th TN General Assembly Of 2013-14, there were no bills to provide funds for school building security improvements. Building security upgrades were left to local school districts.

4) Placing Police in Schools: Many schools across the country, and particularly in the South, have mandated or allowed part-time police, temporary or auxiliary police to be hired as School Resource Officers (SRO'S). Some of the states also introduced bills to provide grants to school districts for hiring SRO's. Depending on school board funding, there may be an SRO in each school, or one may circulate between schools.ⁱⁱⁱ It is believed that having a police presence in or near school will deter school violence. It also strengthens the abilities of local law enforcement and education agencies to prepare for and respond to situations of all kinds in which student safety is threatened. Tennessee legislators introduced seven bills which mandated or allowed School Resource Officers to be in schools and under what circumstances. Most of these bills were left pending or dead in committee. The legislature did pass and the Governor signed HB 06 (which allows school personnel to carry firearms) into law after Governor Haslam said that Tennessee could not afford to put a safety officer in every school.

5) School Climate and Student Support Services: There were eighty-four bills introduced in thirty states which fell into this category. The bills dealt with a wide range of matters including expanding student access to mental health services and resources, "zero tolerance" policies for acts posing a serious threat to school safety, handling bullying, creation of school/community partnerships, gang resistance, and taxing sales of ammunition to pay for prevention and early intervention programs for mental illness. In Tennessee, HB 0966 mandated that any student who threatened violence against school personnel or assaulted a principal or teacher be suspended. This became law in May 2013. HB1105 would have created a two year pilot program that would establish a model comprehensive school safety and mental health services plan. While this bill passed in both the House and the Senate, it died in the finance committee.

6 &7) Easing or Tightening Gun Laws: The Education Week study found that legislators in the South and Midwest introduced forty-five of the seventy-three bills loosening or ending prohibitions on bringing guns onto school property. Most of the bills dealt with the creation of School Resource Officers who would be permitted to have guns or defining alternatives to SRO's who may be armed at school. By contrast, state legislators in the Northeast or West introduced more bills which added penalties for possessing firearms in a school zone and restricting magazine size and sales of certain weapons. Other than the previously mentioned bills regarding School Resource Officers and HB06, Tennessee legislators passed no bills expanding or tightening gun laws.

Locally, Oak Ridge Public Schools have taken a number of positive steps to increase school security. Schools have tightened entrance procedures for visitors

and restricted building ingress and egress. They have added a second School Resource Officer at the high school. This is credited for a vast reduction in the number of thefts, assaults and fights. ORPD has increased unannounced walk-throughs of all the schools. ORPD officers are becoming more familiar with the schools' layouts and have a better understanding of how to respond to emergencies. Recently ORPD conducted a training session for district teachers in how to respond to an "active shooter" situation, which hopefully will never be needed.

ⁱ Education Week. "School Safety Legislation since Newtown." Updated December 6, 2013

ⁱⁱ Education Week. "School Safety Legislation Since Newtown." Updated December 6, 2013

For full Education Week Report see
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/school-safety-bills-since-newtown.htm>