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The State Senate Education Committee and the Assembly Education Committee
Final Hearing
Monday, April 23, 2018 – 4 pm

Senator Ruiz, Assemblywoman Lampitt, and Members of the New Jersey Senate and Assembly Education Committees:

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak before you and provide testimony for what I feel is arguably the most important topic in consideration of education today, and that is the safety of our children and those individual faculty members, professional staff, and administrators who serve them each and every school day. Findings from the School Survey on Crime and Safety¹ reported that the two top factors that limited schools' efforts to reduce or prevent crime "in a major way" included a lack of alternative placements or programs for disruptive students and inadequate school funding. As we all understand that funding is important in consideration of making our buildings safe, I strongly feel that there is no monetary amount that will keep any school building or office perfectly impenetrable. We can all invest in the necessary additions to our physical plants, alternative placements for those students who face serious infractions to the code of conduct, and discuss budgetary items to be fitted on doors and install modern surveillance throughout our hallways; however, it has become most important that there is an understanding that the only true deterrent of terroristic and harmful acts to our children and educational professionals in our schools is to have an acute awareness of potential threats and an ability to work together with all stakeholders to eradicate peril before it occurs.

I applaud the efforts of our state legislators for the passage of P.L. 2017 Ch. 162 and the subsequent training by the Department of Education and the Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning with regard to the implementation of the School Safety Specialist position. A position defined as such will encourage districts to articulate ideas, discuss concerns, and cultivate new methods to ensure that all New Jersey schools are current in consideration of the tools needed to protect our children and keep our schools safe. The Specialist position carries with it the ability to dialogue and network with other district Specialists as an assurance that every school can be afforded the opportunity to understand strategies from other districts that will help strengthen school safety, mitigate safety concerns through true-and-tried measures, and foster a statewide database of strategies and programs for districts to review and use. It is my professional opinion that this position must be utilized in this way and not seen as only an

individual administrator tasked with the duty of assuring that district drills and training are taking place, albeit an important task in consideration of and accountability for the training regimen that must be followed. In turn, the creation of the School Safety Specialist was a most appropriate first step in opening the dialogue to strengthen one of the most salient tenets found embedded within the mission of every school district which, of course, is school safety.

I can speak for the Essex County schools and more specifically, the Belleville Public Schools District when I report that there is constant articulation and communication between the Chief School Administrators and our County Executive Superintendent in consideration of school safety and actions taken to strengthen protocols and enhance programs in our communities with regard to our charge in ensuring school safety. As school superintendents, we wholly understand that the conversation on school security no longer ends with monthly safety drills and professional development to discuss lockdown procedures; rather, the safety of our students must be a consistent dialogue that includes all stakeholders within our communities.

This afternoon, I would like to share with you just a few of the best practices, programs, and preventative measures that I had the honor of helping to implement in my district to enhance the safety of our schools. As the Superintendent of Schools in the Belleville Public Schools District, the Board Trustees, administration, and I have always assured that the interests of our children and professional staff in consideration of school safety are of paramount importance. Working with our Director of Safety Services, we have developed a strategic plan and protocols to ensure that we continue to make a proactive contribution in the daily lives of our students, being ready to react to any situation with regard to school and student safety that may arise at any given moment.

First, our Safety Services Team. The Belleville Public Schools District employs 35, armed School Safety Officers who patrol our schools whenever students, faculty, and staff are present. We also have a Safety Services Cruiser that is used to patrol our schools during outside recess and respond to any school emergency or crisis situation. Since implementing this roving patrol earlier this school year, we have removed unauthorized persons from school lots; identified unknown individuals around school premises; and assisted police in recovering a student who left a building without permission. Most important, the roving patrol provides an awareness that our students are being monitored, acting as a deterrent for any unsavory individuals. Our officers are all retired law enforcement, and they have received training in the use of Narcan; Active Shooter; First Aid Response; and Handle With Care for dealing with students. This is not a group of security guards patrolling the hallways. Instead, the men and women who are the core of the Safety Services Team play an integral role throughout the school day, essentially becoming part of the faculty. These individuals work with our School Resource Officers to ensure a safe, academic environment while providing that familiar “face” for students, staff, and parents who grow to trust in these individuals each new school day. With the instincts of a

veteran police officer and an ability to know the needs of the individual children whom they serve, our Safety Services Officers play an active role in preventing incidents from occurring by having the true pulse of the school community. Our team of officers represents a cogent deterrent to any safety concerns through their prowess in identifying what seems “out of place” or identifying any “red flag” that may warrant further investigation, counseling and mediation services, and police involvement.

A second extremely important addition to the strategic safety plan is our district involvement with community policing as set forth by Belleville Police Chief, Mark Minichini. Over the past several years, we have worked together with our police department to establish greater communications and encourage that our juvenile, School Resource, and day shift officers are active in the day-to-day operations of the district. This includes frequent visits to all of our school sites; interactions with our students; involvement in all of our multicultural and wellness events; and implementing programs with regard to stranger awareness, traffic safety, and drug and alcohol prevention. On some days, you may find a Belleville Police Officer sitting with students during a lunch period or throwing a football outside. During a recent Safety Summit that we held for the Belleville community, Chief Minichini and I encouraged citizens to dialogue with administrators and police when spotting any suspicious activity, and department officials discussed the signs of an active shooter. In all, the increase in patrols and informal visits to schools by our men in women “in blue” have amassed a strong relationship and level of trust in consideration of our students and local law enforcement while growing the articulation between the administration, faculty, and police officials.

Working with our pupil personnel services team, the Board approved the creation of the High School Drop-In Center for the 2017-2018 school year. This has been a successful addition to our guidance and mediation programs, and the center offers students a confidential means to discuss and receive assistance for mental health issues and other adolescent concerns. What the Drop-In Center has also done is provide a safe haven and avenue for students to report potential conflicts and other concerns about students planning harm to themselves and others. During the first 5 months in operation, there were 1,284 student visits to the center which led to 98 referrals for outside evaluations including reports of students with social media posts that threatened student safety. The Drop-In Center continues to advance the open dialogue that has been established for our students, stigma free from fear of being outcast by peers for reporting safety concerns. This has been such a successful venture that the district will be implementing a Drop-In Center at Belleville Middle School beginning in the 2018-2019 school year.

Lastly, I am proud to share with you our district’s launch of the “See Something, Say Something” Campaign. Working together with the Belleville Education Association, the campaign stresses the importance of our students informing parents, teachers, and administrators when they see something out of place or someone who looks suspicious. The campaign also

works to remind our students not to open the outside doors for any visitor and to direct them to the main office. By creating this district-wide awareness, we have solidified the most important first step in maintaining safe schools – to identify the threat or problem before it becomes reality.

It is my professional opinion that we need to place the most emphasis on communicating and articulating with each other to ensure that we can identify and be proactive in mitigating potential safety concerns for our students and professionals within our school districts. Learning cannot occur unless we can provide a safe environment for our children. By providing an open dialogue and a manner in which students are encouraged to alert adults and other professionals to a potential safety crisis and even become respected by their peers in doing so, we continue to move in the right direction in resolving conflict and ultimately, saving lives.

In closing, I would like to thank the Honorable Chairpersons and members of the State Senate and Assembly Education Committees for maintaining your vigilance in this most important area that we face in education today. I implore each of you to keep asking the difficult questions in order that we continue to dialogue in finding solutions to ensuring that the New Jersey schools are at the forefront of keeping our children and their educators safe.

Thank you.

¹ Diliberti, M., Jackson, M., and Kemp, J. (2017). Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools: Findings from the School Survey on Crime and Safety: 2015–16 (NCES 2017-122). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC. Retrieved [date] from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.