Protecting Students and Teachers: A Discussion on School Safety
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Workforce
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The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD), a division of CEC, are pleased to offer testimony for the House Education and the Workforce hearing, *Protecting Students and Teachers: A Discussion on School* Safety.

The tragic events that took place in Newtown, Connecticut in December, 2012 whereby 26 young students and educators were killed by gunfire, must serve as motivation for significant changes at the federal, state and local levels to address violence in our nation's schools and communities. While this heartbreaking event continues to capture the national spotlight, we know that, unfortunately, far too many of our students experience violence on a regular basis in their schools and neighborhoods. The country is looking to the Congress and the Administration for leadership to address the issue of safety in our schools and communities.

Members of CEC and CCBD serve on the frontline, working in schools with children and youth with disabilities and other at-risk students as special education teachers, behavioral specialists, school administrators, or higher education faculty who are preparing the next generation of educators. As a result, CEC/CCBD members are professionally trained to understand the complexities of children and youth with disabilities, including the 371,600 students[1] with diagnosed emotional and behavioral disorders. Through this work, it has become clear that Congress should pursue the following policy recommendations:

1. School safety policy proposals should use an interdisciplinary approach that reinforces a partnership between education, juvenile justice, mental health, social welfare, and community engagement systems;

2. School safety policy proposals should require implementation of evidence based practices that address prevention and response while ameliorating the stigma associated with mental health challenges;

3. School safety policy proposals should focus on the impact of mental health challenges on students' social, educational, and employment outcomes; and

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[1] . "Number of Students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, by disability and state." *U.S. Department of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Data*. Data Accountability Center, n.d. Web. 26 Feb 2013. <http://www.ideadata.org/arc_toc13.asp>

4. School safety policy proposals should confront and remedy the national shortage of special educators and specialized instructional support personnel who are trained to address the complex needs of students with mental health challenges.

Below, we provide a rationale for the above recommendations.

First, it is vital that policy proposals – whether at the federal, state, or local level – use an approach that reinforces interdisciplinary partnerships between education, juvenile justice, mental health, social welfare, and community engagement systems. This approach is necessary because "school violence is not a single problem amenable to a simple solution but, rather, involves a variety of problems and challenges.[2]" While it is tempting to address single issues – such as installing metal detectors at entry points in school buildings -- research has demonstrated that it is necessary to address school safety using a comprehensive, coordinated approach.

Second, in the wake of national tragedies, it has been common to see implementation of policies which represent a knee-jerk response rather than those rooted in evidence and research. It is critical that we learn from past practices and look to research and evidence to determine successful practices and policies. Similar to the adage, *the best offense is a good defense*, we have learned through research and practice about the importance of focusing on prevention. In response to the events at Sandy Hook Elementary School, over100 national organizations representing over 4 million professionals in education and allied fields and over 100 prominent researchers and practitioners supported a statement issued by the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, which stated, "Preventing violence and protecting students includes a variety of efforts addressing physical safety, educational practices, and programs that support the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students."[3]

A review of past initiatives must help inform us of how to move forward today. Policies such as *zero tolerance,* which the American Psychological Association found to be ineffective; *profiling*, for which the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education revealed no accurate or useful demographic or social profile of school attackers[4]; and other simplistic solutions, have not had their intended effect.

Instead, school safety policies should encourage strategies that support prevention and are rooted in research, such as:

- **Fostering Communication**: "Comprehensive analyses by the U.S. Secret Service, the FBI, and numerous researchers have concluded that the most effective way to prevent many acts of violence targeted at schools is by maintaining close communication and trust with students and others in the community.[5]"

  Practically, this means policies must (1) support professional development and training for school staff – including teachers, specialized instructional support personnel, and administrators --

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[2] Cornell, Dewey G., and Matthew J. Mayer. "Why Do School Order and Safety Matter?" *Educational Researcher*. 39.1 (2010): 7-15. Print.
[3] Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence. *Call for More Effective Prevention of Violence*. Dec. 19, 2012. Web. <http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting>.
[4] Borum, Randy, Dewey G. Cornell, William Modzeleski, and Shane Jimerson. "What Can Be Done About School Shootings? A Review of the Evidence." *Educational Researcher*. 39.1 (2010): 27-37. Print.
[5] Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence. *Call for More Effective Prevention of Violence*. Dec. 19, 2012. Web. <http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting>.

regarding effective communication strategies and initiatives; (2) employ a cadre of staff who are professionally trained to address the mental health needs of students; and (3) support changes to teacher preparation programs which reinforce the importance of communication.

- **Supporting a Positive School Climate and Connectedness**: School climate, which impacts school safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment, according to researchers cited by the U.S. Department of Education, plays an integral role into the academic and social development of students. Research has demonstrated that a positive school climate helps create a culture of respect, understanding, and caring among educators and students where members of the school community feel physically and emotionally safe and secure, and facilitates an environment conducive to learning.

  Practically, this means: (1) embracing whole school reforms that reinforce the important role of having a positive school climate, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports; (2) supporting this shift in mindset with the tools and resources needed to foster its implementation, such as professional development and training, and (3) data collection and analysis tools to help schools study and respond to local school climate information.

- **Addressing Needs of Marginalized Students**: "Research indicates that those students most at risk for delinquency and violence are often those who are most alienated from the school community. Schools need to reach out to build positive connections to marginalized students, showing concern and fostering avenues for meaningful involvement."

  Practically, this means: We need to confront and address the persistent national shortage of special educators who are trained to address the complex needs of students with behavioral disorders and the shortage of specialized instructional support personnel such as school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists who are underutilized and underemployed in schools. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education reported a shortage of special educators in every state, continuing a decades-long trend.[6]

- **Increasing School Based Mental Health Services**: School based mental health services for purposes of screening, providing direct services, engaging and supporting families, and serving as a connection to community based supports, are critical to providing the prevention, response, and treatment that are so vital to students' well-being. We must confront the stigma associated with mental health problems through multiple avenues, including making it an integral part of our educational system.

  Practically, this means: Addressing the national shortage of special educators and specialized instructional support personnel by reducing the ratios of students to school counselors to 250:1, school social workers to 250:1, school psychologists 1,000:1, school nurses to 750:1 and often increasing the number of other professionals who are specifically trained to address the mental health needs of students. In many schools, these professionals carry a caseload that far exceeds

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[6] United States. Department of Education Office of Post Secondary Education. *Teacher Shortage Areas Nationwide Listing: 1990-1991 through 2012-2013*. 2012. Web.

the recommended ratios above and far too often, no school-based mental health and student service providers are available to assist students in times of crisis, or at any other time.

In closing, CEC/CCBD stands ready to work with members of Congress to promote policies and meaningful actions not only to address violence in our nation's schools and communities but to create solutions that are rooted in safety, prevention, and an interdisciplinary approach.