Finding Common Ground

"The most important job we have as legislators is to ensure the safety of our children and our communities."

BY BEN ERWIN

Legislators are working across the aisle to keep students and staff safe at school.

When the federal school safety commission was formed in early March in response to the shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., state lawmakers had already begun responding to the horrific event. It was the sixth school shooting of 2018, and it was only Feb. 14.

“The most important job we have as legislators is to ensure the safety of our children and our communities,” Maryland Speaker Michael Busch (D) said, echoing the feelings of many.

A shooting five weeks after Parkland’s at a high school in Lexington Park, Md., about 70 miles southeast of Washington, D.C., catapulted a package of school safety bills to the top of Maryland’s legislative agenda. The final legislation, signed by the governor on April 10, includes an array of strategies for ensuring the safety of students and staff.

“We have really done something very important for the state,” Senator Steve Waugh (R), a co-sponsor of the legislation, said. His district includes Great Mills High School, where the shooting occurred. Senate Bill 1265, or the Safe to Learn Act, outlines additional safety measures and appropriates $10 million annually to implement the changes in the act, including:

• School resource officer or adequate law enforcement coverage requirements.
• School emergency plans and drills.
• Infrastructural requirements.
• Threat assessment teams.
• Coordination of mental health services.

Students gathered at the Florida Capitol to promote school safety laws following the shooting in Parkland in February. Above right, some shared their personal experiences with Senator Debbie Mayfield, in her Capitol office.

Ben Erwin is a research analyst in NCSL’s Education Department.
• Reporting requirements.
• Flexible new grant funding to meet district needs.
• Increased role and funding for the Maryland Center for School Safety.
• Development of a model policy.

A Bipartisan Effort

The act was the culmination of a bipartisan effort to enact comprehensive school safety legislation. It passed the House and Senate with more than 80 percent of the vote. The legislation shows that “both Democrats and Republicans share a commitment to keeping students, their families and educators safe,” Senator Katherine Klausmeier (D), the primary sponsor of the legislation, said.

The effort “embodies the notion that politics is the art of the possible,” Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller (D) said. “We passed a comprehensive school safety package because lawmakers from both parties were more concerned about making the process work and getting the policy right than scoring points with

Federal Commission

President Donald Trump formed a federal commission on school safety this year to identify meaningful policy recommendations to prevent school violence. Led by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, the commission is studying a range of topics, including: facility security, mental health services, coordination of law enforcement, threat assessment and school-based violence prevention strategies, positive behavior interventions, and the possible influence of video games.

DeVos is hosting a series of listening sessions, site visits and roundtable conversations across the country. In June they met in Lexington, Ky., where Senators Max Wise and Danny Carroll shared valuable testimony on state efforts there to prevent school violence. Carroll spoke from experience. A school shooting in his district killed two students and injured 18 others. Both men are on the Kentucky School Safety Work Group that Wise co-chairs.

“Many state legislators are deliberating on this very topic right now, formulating policy and plans unique to their situation. We know there is no one-size-fits-all approach,” says DeVos. The commission will release a final report by the end of the year.

The commission and other federal, state and local leaders are tracking nearly 350 state bills and resolutions through NCSL’s School Safety Bill Tracker. To learn more about this database, visit www.ncsl.org.

—Joan Wodiska
**Preventing School Shootings**

The Education Week Research Center conducted a survey of 399 school-based resource officers in March and April 2018 on how to make schools safer. Here are the responses to some of the questions.

**What could schools do to prevent future school shootings?**

Percent of officers listing each action

- Improve student/staff training on school security awareness of threats: 33%
- Secure school buildings and increase physical security measures: 29%
- Employ adequate security staff, school resource officers: 24%
- Address mental health concerns: 16%
- Encourage students and staff to report safety concerns: 10%
- Use armed security staff, school resource officers: 8%
- Build relationships between school staff and students: 8%
- Foster social/emotional learning, anti-bullying efforts: 5%
- Use armed staff other than security personnel or school resource officers: 3%
- Other: 10%
- Nothing: 2%
- I don’t know: 1%

**Note:** Responses were coded into all applicable answer categories. Individual items do not sum to 100 percent.

Statements of bipartisanship represented more than rhetoric. The substance of the final bill addressed the concerns of stakeholders and legislators on both sides of the aisle. Rachel Hise, a policy analyst for the nonpartisan Maryland Department of Legislative Services, described the effort by legislators and staff to develop comprehensive school safety legislation in the final weeks of the session as “mammoth.”

“It was a truly unique effort all the way around,” she said. “The speaker and the president agreed action needed to be taken. The legislative committees worked hard with staff to ensure that nothing was left out.”

In the bill’s early stages, legislators and staff collaborated with the Center for School Safety and local education agencies, as well as chiefs of police, other law enforcement organizations and mental health service providers, to determine what was already being done and identify areas of need. The inclusion of new, flexible grant funding and support from the Center for School Safety resulted from this collaboration.

**Not Just Maryland**

The Florida Legislature enacted a similarly comprehensive bill, Senate Bill 7026, which establishes the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission and the Office for Safe Schools. At the bill’s signing, Florida Senate President Joe Negron (R) said, “We can never replace the 17 lives lost at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, but in their memory we can, and through this legislation we will, do more to prevent a senseless tragedy like this from ever happening again.”

The bill also supplies grant funding for student crime watch programs, sets various gun control measures and allows qualified school personnel—classroom teachers excluded, except in rare circumstances—to serve as “school guardians” after undergoing comprehensive evaluations and extensive training.

Representative Jared Moskowitz (D), a Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School graduate, explained the rare successful bipartisan effort in Florida to Politico this way: “When you attend more than a dozen funerals and you’re dealing with grieving families, you have an all-hands-on-deck mentality.”

**Different Approaches**

Several other legislatures have addressed school safety concerns this year as well. Legislators have enacted 26 bills and six resolutions in 17 states since Feb. 14. The Florida shooting, and the response of surviving students to it, re-energized the debate. But it didn’t start the discussion. In fact, of the 319 school safety bills considered this year, a third (109) were introduced before the Parkland shooting. These bills include a variety of approaches to the issue.

**Law Enforcement Collaboration and Communication**

About half the states considered bills encouraging or requiring collaboration and communication with local law enforcement.

- 88 bills or resolutions introduced
- 24 states
- Nine enacted or adopted

**Developing Emergency Response Plans**

Although most states already require school districts to develop emergency response plans, nearly half considered bills to augment existing procedures.

- 42 bills or resolutions introduced
- 21 states
- Nine enacted or adopted

**Requiring Emergency Drills**

Most states require drills for inclement
weather or fires, but more than a dozen considered active-shooter drills to prepare staff and students for the possibility of a school shooting.
• 28 bills or resolutions introduced
• 14 states
• Four enacted or adopted

Regulating and Training School Resource Officers
Besides addressing school resource officer training and hiring requirements, measures like Georgia’s Senate Bill 470 mandate the presence of a resource officer at all K-12 schools.
• 55 bills or resolutions introduced
• 20 states
• Five enacted or adopted

Strengthening Building Security
Proposals to “harden” school buildings—or beef up their security—include adding or improving metal detectors, alarm systems and reinforced doors.
• 43 bills or resolutions introduced
• 19 states
• 10 enacted or adopted

Increasing Access to Mental Health Services
These measures call for a mental health professional to be present in K-12 schools and require that teachers and counselors receive mental health training, collaborate with local mental health professionals or implement a mental health awareness curriculum.
• 23 bills or resolutions introduced
• 16 states
• Six enacted or adopted

Guns in Schools
Of the more than 200 bills or resolutions proposed by legislators in 24 states since the Parkland shooting, 56 addressed firearms at K-12 schools.

High-Tech Security Increasing
The school security market has surged to a $2.7-billion-a-year industry as schools install metal detectors, X-ray machines, entry control equipment, ID technology, video surveillance, and alarm and protection systems, according to a recent analysis by IHS Markit, a London-based firm that monitors and analyzes the world of technology. The next wave of products available to school districts could include facial-recognition cameras and impenetrable classroom doors, the firm says.


Go to ncsl.org/magazine and visit NCSL’s School Safety webpage for more information.