

DON'T STOP THERE

By Dr. Eric C. Eshbach, PA Principals Association Executive Director



The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) recently released its 8th annual *State of Education Report (2024)*, highlighting the successes and challenges of public education in our state. Please take time to download and read the entire report, as it contains many insights into the current issues facing public education today. One area, however, resonated with

me due to some recent work being done by the PA Principals Association to advocate for our members and the students whom they serve. According to PSBA's report, of the 276 school district respondents (of the potential 500 school districts), 79% indicated that student mental health issues led the list of instructional challenges faced by public schools. The prevalence of mental health issues among students shocked me. On average, half of the students who enter our buildings are dealing with some type of mental health issue and many respondents reported that over 60% of their students were dealing with this issue. While our school leaders try to assist students with these emotional struggles, they are challenged with a scarcity of mental health care providers, the reluctance some students and families have to seek support and the lack of funding necessary to fully address this problem. We work collaboratively with PSBA and the other education organizations to shine a light on this issue, but we cannot stop there.

SO, WE ADVOCATE IN OUR STATE...

There are shining examples of how principals in Pennsylvania are handling the student mental health crisis. I was fortunate to accompany Dr. Harrison Bailey III, principal at Liberty High School in the Bethlehem Area School District, as he testified on this subject at a Pennsylvania House of Representatives Education Committee hearing. I was moved by his example of what one school can do to address this crisis. They have infused mindfulness training, a tiered assessment and service assignment process, the inclusion of mental health curriculum into health classes and professional development for all staff on understanding trauma, toxic stress and social-emotional learning. Most importantly, Liberty High School has developed one of the commonwealth's few school-based multi-tiered wellness centers for students. For a more in-depth look at the great things happening at Liberty High School, view the video at this link: <https://vimeo.com/900244840/529a27d910?share=copy>. However, even with these amazing efforts to address this crisis, they are still limited by funding and accessible professionals to meet their students' needs. I certainly applaud Governor Shapiro's efforts to include \$100 million for mental health resources in this year's budget proposal. I encourage the legislature to recognize this dire need, but not to stop there. In a similar vein, the PA Principals Association advocacy cannot end at the state level.

SO, WE ADVOCATE NATIONALLY...

Our Association was given a unique opportunity in January when I received an invitation to bring a group of secondary principals to a School Principals Town Hall at the White House on the topic of gun violence. I had a brief time to round up a group of administrators from Pennsylvania, so I put out a communication asking for those who had been impacted by violence to let me know. I was deeply disturbed by the great number of responses I received from principals and assistant principals who have been the target of violence or who have experienced an incident of gun violence in their school.

Limited by the number who could attend this briefing, a small group traveled to the White House where we were greeted by First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden, Secretary of Education, Dr. Miguel Cardona, and Director of the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention, Stefanie Feldman. The goal of the town hall was to introduce a new initiative to promote the distribution and education on the use of gun safety locks. This effort marks a step toward preventing gun violence in schools, but our national leaders cannot stop there. For more information on this initiative, please read the article, *White House to Principals: Talk to Parents About Gun Safety* (Banerji 2024).

It is overtly evident that a majority, if not all, incidents of gun violence are a direct result of a mental health issue. The



Liberty High School Principal, Dr. Harrison Bailey III, provided testimony on the topic of the student mental health crisis at the House Education Committee meeting in January.



Attending the gun violence town hall at the White House from the PA Principals Association were (from l to r): Dr. Timothy Wagner, secondary principal; Dr. Benjamin Feeney, secondary principal; Dr. Eric Eshbach, Executive Director; Dr. Scott Zraggen, secondary assistant principal; Dr. Harrison Bailey III, secondary principal; and Jonathan Bauer, secondary

recent trial of Jennifer Crumbley, the mother of a student in Michigan who shot and killed four classmates, and her conviction of involuntary manslaughter highlighted the fact that when a student suffers from mental health issues and

has parents who ignore those issues and who don't take gun ownership and gun safety seriously, deadly results will ensue. The epidemic of violence in schools (not just gun violence) is directly correlated to our mental health crisis. So, while gun locks may be a good first step, we cannot stop there.

SO, WE ENGAGE OUR MEMBERS...

I am committed to working to address the mental health crisis in Pennsylvania schools as well as the violence that often manifests itself in the school setting. The principals of Pennsylvania's schools need to be heard in our local communities, in our state and in our nation. We need to institute efforts like those being done at Liberty High School to meet the needs of our suffering students. We need to engage with each other to push for more funding for mental health resources. We need to work with partner organizations to elevate the work of those who serve in the mental health field. We need to emphasize that preventative measures of addressing mental health issues in students are more likely to deter a school shooter than an armed guard in each school. Don't stop here. Watch the video from Liberty High School. Commit to becoming engaged. Commit to being a part of finding solutions to the mental health crisis. Don't stop here. ■

REFERENCES:

- Banerji, O. (2024, January 29). *White House to Principals: Talk to Parents About Gun Safety*. edweek.org. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/white-house-to-principals-talk-to-parents-about-gun-safety/2024/01?utm_medium=email&utm_source=rasa_io&utm_campaign=newsletter
- State of Education Report - Pennsylvania*. (2024). (Report No. 8). Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA). <https://www.psbpa.org/2024-state-of-education-report/>

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