

# ALABAMA SCHOOL SECURITY AND STUDENT AND TEACHER SAFETY REPORT

APRIL 16, 2013

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# Purpose

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On December 14, 2012, a tragic mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, took the lives of twenty students and six faculty members. In the wake of this shooting, House Speaker Mike Hubbard called for a joint hearing of the House and Senate Education Policy Committees to complete a comprehensive review of the issue and submit immediate, achievable legislative recommendations to ensure public schools across Alabama are as safe, secure and protected as possible. The joint hearing was held on January 9 at the State House in Montgomery and included presentations and comments from numerous education and law enforcement groups, including Dr. Tommy Bice, Superintendent of the Alabama Department of Education, the Alabama Department of Homeland Security, the Alabama District Attorney's Association, the Alabama Sheriff's Association, and others. In addition, an e-mail address was created ([educationpolicycommittees@gmail.com](mailto:educationpolicycommittees@gmail.com)) to allow interested groups and individuals that were unable to attend or present information at the joint hearing to submit their comments and suggestions for consideration.

Based on the input received at the joint hearing and through e-mail, the following are our recommendations on immediate actions that the Legislature can take to improve school safety across Alabama.

# Recommendations

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## Active Shooter or Intruder Drills

Public schools are currently required to have fire drills once a month while school is in session but are not required to have any active shooter or intruder drills. House Bill 91, sponsored by Rep. Alan Baker (R – Brewton), would replace existing “fire drill” language in favor of “emergency drills” that would take into consideration other emergency situations, and would require a “Code Red” drill be conducted once per semester during the first 6 weeks of the semester. A “Code Red” drill would prepare students and faculty for a perceived threat of violence that would necessitate a hard lockdown of the school. Currently, only 35% of schools hold such drills, but once this legislation is enacted, every school will be required to take part in this important preventative exercise.

## Criminal punishment for school bus trespassers

Parents should rest assured knowing that their children are not only safe in school but also traveling to and from. The tragedy in Dale County just a few months ago brought to the forefront the importance of safety on our school buses. House Bill 105, sponsored by Rep. Alan Baker (R – Brewton), will create a new crime for trespassing on school buses to ensure that our students are safe at all times during the school day.

## Increase electronic security equipment for local school systems

According to a recent survey by the School Superintendents Association of Alabama, many of our school systems do not have adequate school safety equipment and technology in place to help prevent or minimize the impact of an active shooter event:

- 46% of teachers cannot lock classroom doors from the inside
- 71% of schools cannot monitor all exterior doors from a central location
- 96% of schools cannot lock all exterior doors from a central location.

House Bill 612, sponsored by Rep. Allen Treadaway (R – Morris), will authorize the Alabama Public School and College Authority to sell and issue up to \$50 million in bonds to provide funds for local school systems to purchase the necessary equipment and renovations to secure all entrances to every public K-12 school in the state. Schools that already have secure entrances can use the funds for other school safety equipment such as surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and other necessary equipment and renovations.

## Provide local boards of education the opportunity to hire armed APOST certified school resource officers

We believe that local school systems should have the option to hire armed, APOST-certified (Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training) school resource officers at the discretion of the local board of education. Currently, schools only have this ability if the local law enforcement agency, such as police departments or sheriff's offices, pay for and send their own officers to patrol these schools. In addition, the Department of Education has actually threatened to withhold funding from schools that have armed guards. Several legislators have introduced local legislation that gives schools within certain counties the ability to hire their own armed resource officers. Senate Bill 383, sponsored by Senator Dick Brewbaker (R – Pike Road), would allow local school systems, with the approval of the local board of education, to use local education funds to hire armed APOST-certified school resource officers without the threat of lost state funding. Passage of this bill would simply provide the option for local school systems to hire their own armed officers, it would not mandate that they do so.

## Provide an active shooter preparation course in all Alabama public schools

School personnel who have received training for an active shooter emergency will be more prepared and better able to take action should a situation take place at his or her school.

House Joint Resolution 204, sponsored by Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin (R – Indian Springs), encourages the Alabama Department of Education and the Alabama Department of Homeland Security to create an active shooter preparation course to be used in all public schools in Alabama. The Department of Homeland Security should seek input from other education, law enforcement, and emergency management entities in creation of the course. In addition, all local school safety plans will be required to include an active shooter component as well as the implementation of this active shooter preparation course.

## Increase funding for Virtual Alabama and active shooter training for law enforcement

In October 2005, the Alabama Department of Homeland Security began a project to capture all existing state infrastructure data and imagery into an easy to use, 3D visualization tool that was internet accessible. The result of that project was Virtual Alabama, and it has been the model for other states since its implementation in 2006. Virtual Alabama has been a vital tool for emergency management, law enforcement, and other first responders to protect lives and safeguard citizens before, during, and after a disaster, whether it is a hurricane or an active shooter situation in a school. We recommend increasing funding for the Department of Homeland Security specifically for the purpose of expanding the Virtual Alabama program and the availability of active shooter training to more state and local law enforcement officers. The proposed Education Trust Fund budget for FY2014 includes a \$3.9M supplemental appropriation for public safety, and part of these funds have been assigned to the Virtual Alabama program.

## Resolution to improve mental health support services in schools

Individuals that commit a pre-planned and deadly act like the Newtown shooting often have some sort of psychological and emotional instability developed months, if not years, before the incident that was not properly treated at the time. The earlier psychological and emotional problems can be detected and treated, the less likely it is that individuals will engage in violent behavior. Given the amount of time that students spend in school each day, teachers and school administrators can and should be a part of this process. Specifically, they should be able to identify students showing psychological and emotional symptoms and report these concerns to the proper law enforcement officials. Recently, a teacher at Russell County High School found suspicious drawings from a student and immediately reported them to local law enforcement. Law enforcement officials searched the student's home and found dozens of homemade bombs along with a hit list of students at the school. While it is not always possible to prevent incidents like Newtown, this teacher's swift action may have prevented a similar occurrence from happening in Alabama. House Joint Resolution 226, sponsored by Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin (R – Indian Springs), encourages the Alabama Department of Education and the Alabama Department of Mental Health to expand their efforts to provide support services at all of Alabama's public schools to detect and treat psychological and emotional disorders. In addition, the Department of Education is encouraged to create continuing education programs for teachers focused on recognizing signs of students that display psychological and emotional symptoms.

## Regular meetings of School Safety Taskforce

Nothing is more vital to adequately preparing for and responding to active shooter and other emergency situations in our schools than proper communication and cooperation between federal, state, and local education and law enforcement groups. Recently, Alabama Homeland Security Director Spencer Collier held a meeting with 17 stakeholder groups including federal, state and local agencies, education organizations and law enforcement groups to discuss numerous issues related to school safety. House Joint Resolution 205, sponsored by Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin (R – Indian Springs), encourages Director Collier and this School Safety Taskforce to continue holding regular meetings, and to include legislative leadership in future meetings.

## Conclusion

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There is nothing more important than the security of our children and teachers in an environment where they should feel the most safe - our schools. Adoption of these recommendations will improve school safety across Alabama and ensure that we are as prepared as possible to prevent or at the very least mitigate potential problems if they happen in our schools.