

**Testimony in Support of House Bill 1235
Maryland Center for School Safety—
School Employee Injury Reporting and Study**

Ways and Means Committee

February 28, 2020

1:00 PM

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The subject of school safety has recently sparked a great deal of attention, particularly as it relates to student suspension rates and the efficacy of this practice as a deterrent of further disruptive behavior. Concurrently, there is a great deal of attention being paid to bullying in schools. Teachers must take professional development courses on the subject. There is an Anti-Bullying Week complete with public service messages. Schools are meant to be safe and orderly. But are they, and if yes, for whom? There is very little research and data regarding violence against teachers.

Is being a teacher the same as serving in the military? The American media like to invoke references to “war” when discussing societal challenges. There was the War on Poverty (started by the Johnson Administration); the War on Drugs; and the War on Crime. Sara Mosle, in a review of Diane Ravitch’s recently published book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* opens with,

Barack Obama inherited George W. Bush's war—not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in the nation's public schools. Bush's battle plan was to criticize teachers' unions, increase the number of charter schools, and promote testing and accountability through No Child Left Behind, his signature legislation. Over the past year, Obama has done more than continue to prosecute his predecessor's war.

If asked, most people respond that a police officer has a dangerous job. They deal with criminal elements and are often confronted with persons who are sometimes armed and dangerous. There is a conversation right now regarding the proper use of force by officers. Regardless of your position on the matter, there is no disagreement that a police officer runs the risk of personal bodily harm. Recently the Oklahoma Department of Public Safety conducted a study on the frequency of attacks on officers. **Using the most recent data from 2011, they found there were nearly 55,000 assaults on police officers.** The total number of law enforcement officers that year was 698,460.

The Officer Down Memorial Page lists the names of each law enforcement officer who dies while on duty. Each year, there are over 100 officers who give their lives in the line of duty; and each year, there is a Police Week held in Washington D.C. with a day dedicated to remembering those who passed. There is no National Educator Memorial commemorating those educators who

gave their lives protecting their students. Many teachers refer to their students as “my kids” and their sacrifices give credence to that nomenclature.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 127,120 (4 percent) public school teachers (K-12) were physically attacked at school—hit, kicked, bitten, slapped, stabbed or shot—during the 2007-08 school year. The Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics released a report entitled, “Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010.” What they concluded was there were 145,100 public school teachers who reported being physically attacked by students at their schools in the course of a single school year. That is nearly three times the number of police officers. Additionally, another 276,700 public school teachers reported being threatened with injury by a student in that school year.

A more recent report released by the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics revealed more disconcerting news. **A record 209,800 primary and secondary school teachers reported being physically attacked by a student during the 2011-2012 school year. This represents a 34.5 percent increase and reveals an escalation of attacks on teachers in schools.** Men reported more incidences of assault with a weapon and physical attacks. **According to the report, an average of 1,175 teachers are physically attacked each day of the school year.**

Why is this happening? What is the flashpoint that has led more students to become violent? Using teacher blogs as indicators, teachers report flash points such as: asking a student for a cellphone that’s being used during class; asking a student to remove a hood during class; or student anger over a grade they have received. The attacks leave lasting effects. One teacher reported, “A 16 year old boy threatened to rape my colleague’s baby. He did not get expelled.” On the same blog, another teacher reported, “A mother head butted then kneed a male teacher, causing a testicular torsion and the loss of one testicle. This was because the teacher told the boy to stop ‘graffitiing’ [sp] the desk.” Other incidents include:

- A 12-year-old boy from Surprise, Arizona, who smashed teachers with a computer keyboard and kicked and punched until a police officer could restrain him;
- A Manchester, New Hampshire, eighth-grade teacher “body slammed” by a student, which left her on crutches;
- A substitute teacher from Pittsburgh who lost hearing in one ear and suffered blurred vision after students tossed an M-80 explosive into his classroom where he was reading alone; and
- A fourth-grade teacher from St. Louis who collapsed and died of a heart attack after a physical altercation with a nine-year-old.

Students are now using social media as a weapon. In one example, “Six Carson City, Nevada, middle school students were arrested in January for posting a Facebook invitation for students to take part in ‘Attack a Teacher Day’ at two local middle schools. Before a parent alerted authorities, 18 students had already signed up to join in the mass assault.”

Unlike police officers or military personnel, teacher preparation rarely includes personal defense training. One teacher stated, "I was thinking, I was not trained for this, this is not what I signed up for," she said. "Who goes to work thinking that they are going to be involved in an incident like this? Who goes to work thinking that a parent is going to attack them?"

Professor Dorothy Espelage at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign stated there was a "paucity" of research in a 2011 study entitled *Understanding and Preventing Violence Directed Against Teachers*. She suggested creating a national clearing house for teachers to report incidents so that a clearer picture could be made and solutions developed. The Officer Down Memorial Page distinguishes cause of death on duty into various categories. An internet search on educators who die on duty generally leads to a specific incident with no overall picture, unlike the Officer Down Memorial Page.

Many teachers leave the profession because of discipline issues. Richard Ingersoll, professor at the University of Pennsylvania's education school, conducted a study on teacher retention and noted, "Those schools that do a far better job of managing and coping with and responding to student behavioral issues have far better teacher retention." **According to MetLife's 2012 Survey of the American Teacher, 29 percent of current teachers reported they were likely to leave the profession—an increase from 2009.** Imagine if 29 percent of doctors said they were considering leaving the profession? Many countries talk of the "brain drain" of professionals and the negative impact it has, not only academically but also economically and socially. Are we experiencing the same situation without the emigration?

More alarming is the increase in teacher suicides. Suicides as a result of cyberbullying have made front page news. Suicides of military personnel are greater than combat zone casualties. Holly Houston, a PTSD specialist at the Anxiety & Stress Center in Homewood and Orland Park, works with teachers. **"Of the teachers that I have counseled over the years who have been assaulted, 100 percent of them have satisfied diagnostic criteria for PTSD."**

She further extrapolates, "In this environment, experts say, it is possible that even teachers who have never been attacked can suffer symptoms of PTSD. They may feel anxious or on edge."

There are several factors which contribute to the lawlessness. Teachers are reluctant to pursue legal measures. **According to one study, only 57 percent of teachers assaulted reported the incidents to administrators.** Given the new requirements to report violent incidents, school administrators do not want the classification of having a dangerous school and will dissuade teachers from pursuing legal retribution.

New laws and regulations regarding suspensions are a factor. Incidents that in the past would have been sufficient to suspend or expel a student are no longer viewed as warranting that sort of "punishment." Principals are told to keep disruptive and even violent students in school, creating a more unruly and hostile environment. There is a perception by students that they can act in a consequence-free manner.

There is a societal factor. The crux of the No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top is that teachers have been slacking off and bad teachers have been allowed to keep their lifetime jobs.

In a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, 74 percent of respondents with the oldest child in a public school gave their local school an A or B. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated, "Too many people don't understand how bad their own schools are."

Educational psychologist, Gerald Bracey commented that, "Americans never hear anything positive about the nation's schools," and "Negative information flows almost daily from media, politicians, and ideologues." **Our students are getting the message that their teachers are inferior.**

A survey of school personnel by The Horace Mann League listed the top ten factors judged to be most detrimental to the success of public school. The number one factor the teachers identified was the negative perceptions about public educators. In a speech entitled "A Worm in the Apple: Hollywood's Influence on the Public's Perception of Teachers" presented in 1993, Steven Thompson reviewed the characterizations of teachers in media from the 1950s to 1993. He suggested that the media was increasingly portraying teachers as incompetent.

Citing a sociological theory called Cultivation Theory, Thompson stated, "The more an individual is exposed to mass-mediated messages, the more that individual will come to believe that the real world reflects media content." He also pointed to the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll which is conducted annually, which indicated an increasingly hostile perception toward teachers.

The recent California court case, *Vergara v. California*, struck down the California teacher tenure laws as protecting incompetent teachers. While it established that every child is entitled to a competent teacher, an idea with which no one would disagree, it created a satirical solution. The issue of tenure is portrayed as simply protecting teachers' jobs and not as due process. In this environment of negative portrayals, what message is being sent to students regarding respect?

Dennis Van Roekel, past president of the National Education Association stated, "School campuses are still among the safest places in the country, but that doesn't take away the hurt and sadness when someone is lost at school...and we have to do more to ensure the safety of the students and those who work there." **Yet a USA Today article cites at least 17 teachers, principals, and other staff members have been killed by students since 1995.** Again, this is not a comprehensive evaluation including other causes of death such as heart attack.

In August 2012, a student at Perry Hall High School brought a shotgun to the cafeteria and opened fire. One student was wounded and survived. A school guidance counselor subdued the shooter. There has been an outcry to have armed officers at schools as a deterrent and as a means of protection. Perry Hall had two armed police officers present.

In November 2014, a student at another Baltimore County Public School was arrested as he planned a shooting and had the means to carry it out. In 2011, 8 percent of male students reported carrying a weapon on school grounds. Using current statistics, this means roughly 560,000 male students in high schools across the U.S. bring weapons to campus. Roughly 2 percent of female students bring weapons. The tragedy at Columbine illustrates that this is not simply a problem in poor, urban schools.

The events at Sandy Hook epitomize the extent to which teachers will go to protect their students, namely giving their lives. In a time when people chant “all lives matter”, the media did not fully recognize the sacrifices of the educators. This is consistently true across the nation. There is no educator discount at venues as there is for military personnel. There is no educator night at sporting events. There are no parades for educators nor a Teacher Memorial. There are many more websites criticizing educators than honoring them. Teachers frequently do not know when Teacher Appreciation Day is.

The compensation to teachers killed in the line of duty is often limited. After Barry Grunow, a Lake Worth Middle School teacher, was killed by a student, his family received \$25,000. The legal opinion in the case contended “The Palm Beach County School Board has the discretionary authority to make a determination that a teacher's family deserves support and assistance.” The key word is discretionary. There are no Purple Hearts or medals for bravery awarded to school personnel.

Veterans returning from the Vietnam War experienced unfair victimization. Lt. Colonel Tom Griffin served three tours in Vietnam. He recounts his experience returning as hostile. On why this happened, he remarked, “People believe whatever is noisiest out there,” Griffin said. “I guess he who cries loudest will sway public opinion.” In a recent *Monitor* editorial, “The public policy debate and, ultimately, the societal fissure that emanated from this debate laid a foundation of antagonism, of mistrust, and of open hostility between Americans that spoke to the stakes of this important debate... That resulted in the unfair victimization of those who served their country in this war as a matter of duty.”

Joseph Stalin once said, “A single death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic.” Assaults on teachers is one statistic that does not seem to matter. For teachers, it is not a statistic. Personally, I have experienced a student who brought a gun to class as well as students with knives. I have been physically assaulted on several occasions by students and verbally threatened. I had a student throw a brick through my front window. One morning, a parent barged into my classroom demanding to know why her child was failing. Twice I had students who had been incarcerated for assaults and I was not told. One of them threw a chair at the principal.

Most teachers can relate stories of comrades who sustained injuries. One friend was assaulted and so badly injured, he has not returned to work. One female co-worker who was pregnant was intentionally punched in the stomach. Several friends sustained injuries breaking up fights. At one school in which I taught, we considered Krav Maga instruction for our professional development.

There are numerous reasons teachers do not report assaults. Some do not want to get police involved. Some do not want the hassle. Unfortunately, many are pressured by administrators not to report incidents. Fear of having a school declared “dangerous” is motivation for many administrators to discourage teachers from reporting violence.

On a daily basis, educators risk their lives. The issue of violence in schools will continue to escalate given the messages the public receives. When confronted by a reporter regarding assaults on teachers, one Maryland superintendent stated that discipline was not a problem. This is the same local education agency where my friend sustained a traumatic brain injury from an assault where he works.

For Maryland schools to genuinely be effective and safe, the school culture must support that structure. We need to acknowledge the current situation and stop denying there is a problem. First, we need to know how extensive the problem is and its effects. **Safe schools need to include the adults. Quantifying the problem is the first step.**

We need to examine and reconstitute what education means. No Child Left Behind was intended to create better schools but it did not recognize the unintended consequences. Congressman Wayne Gilchrist (MD-1) voted against the legislation. He had been a teacher and knew how this would change education. I was co-chair of the Maryland State Teachers' Association committee on NCBLA—a committee tasked with determining how NCLB would impact Maryland's schools. I assert it created the impact of educational climate change and the bullying and violence are results.

I serve my country; I teach public school! I did not enter education to be all I could be. My job is to prepare others to be all they can be.

Endnotes

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