



January 22, 2013

Vice President Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20501

Re: School Safety Proposals

Dear Vice President Biden:

Thank you for chairing the Task Force created by President Obama and leading development of comprehensive recommendations to reduce gun violence and improve school safety. The California School Boards Association (CSBA), representing school districts in California, appreciates federal efforts to reduce violence in schools and support schools in ensuring the safety of students, teachers, principals and staff. CSBA looks forward to reviewing and commenting upon these initiatives as they are further refined and as we continue to work at the state and local level to provide resources to local governing boards to improve safety and prevent and reduce violence in schools.

We write now to comment on the proposals thus far, provide information on related school safety issues and practices in California and share some of the resources and work of CSBA.

CSBA is pleased that the President's proposals on safety are comprehensive and recognize the issues of school climate and mental health as central to school safety. Addressing these issues takes thought, effort and time to address; knee-jerk reactions won't engender real solutions. CSBA appreciates the recognition in the proposed school safety initiatives that each school is different and needs flexibility to address the needs and priorities particular to it.

CSBA School Safety Resources

School safety has long been a policy initiative and priority of CSBA. With this issue gaining momentum in local communities due to the recent shootings, CSBA launched an online repository that includes not only the association's safety guides and policy papers but also new tools and checklists for school district governance teams to help them ensure the currency of school safety plans. www.csba.org/EducationIssues/

Highlights of this work and resources include:

Community Schools. The challenges of creating school climates that are safe, conducive to learning and to closing achievement gaps require collaboration and engagement with community partners. The community schools model recognizes the need for creative partnerships of schools with other segments and agencies including health and mental health, social services, business and law enforcement. CSBA resources and policy briefs on Community Schools are available at www.csba.org.

Anti-bullying materials and webinar. Several of the incidents of school violence, including the shooting at Taft High School on January 10, 2013 near Bakersfield, California, have noted that bullying activities occurred prior to the incident. For a number of years, CSBA has worked on developing resources, policies and information on anti-bullying. A CSBA webinar, which may be viewed on demand, focuses on the link between a safe and positive school environment and improved student attendance, engagement and achievement in school.

Recognizing promising practices. The CSBA annual Golden Bell award has recognized two California districts recently for outstanding school safety policies and programs. We are sharing the practices of these districts on the CSBA website.

The President's proposals address issues and offer incentives

The Comprehensive School Safety Program to help schools hire more school resource officers, school psychologists and social workers and counselors. Research shows that student connections to caring adults can have a real impact in creating a positive school climate. Counselors, school psychologists, social workers and resource officers can play a significant role in this effort.

This proposal has potential to help address a significant need in California. The reductions in education funding over the last five years have caused many districts to reduce if not eliminate counselors, psychologists, social workers and resource officers. The state has some of the highest ratios of counselors to students and school psychologists. For example, data cited by EdSource (www.edsource.org), based on 2009-10, shows that California has one counselor for every 810 students. The American School Counselor Association recommends one counselor to 250 students.

Strategies to improve school climate and discipline. We are interested in learning more about the proposal for \$50 million in new funding to help schools put in place strategies to improve school climate and discipline. These are critical issues and as noted above CSBA has been working with stakeholders and state legislators to examine and promote training on discipline policies and school climate issues.

Emergency response plans and training teachers and students. We appreciate the proposal to have four federal agencies -- Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security -- collaborate on development of model emergency response plans for schools and the inclusion of best practices on training teachers and students on plans. We also appreciate the proposal for one-time grants to states to help school districts develop and implement emergency management plans.

California schools are currently required to adopt comprehensive school safety plans and to annually update them. Schools are encouraged to partner with local law enforcement in developing the plans and are to include certain specified elements in the plans. Pursuant to state legislation effective July 2012, these plans are encouraged to include bullying prevention policies and procedures. The President's proposal for additional resources for implementation of plans and for a dissemination of best practices will be of benefit given the renewed spotlight on the need for preparation and planning to prevent or handle incidents of school violence.

National dialogue on mental health with Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and the mental health initiative, Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education (AWARE). CSBA is encouraged by the proposal to engage a national dialogue on mental health and by the AWARE package of new funding to ensure that young people with mental health problems are identified and receive services they need in a timely manner. The proposals, including funds for training to help teachers and others who work with young people to identify students with mental health problems early, to train mental health professionals who want to work with young people, and to help schools offer mental health services aimed at combating trauma, anxiety, and bolstering conflict resolution are on the right track.

The provision of mental health services to young people in California continues to be a challenge. CSBA is engaged in a variety of venues to try to address the issues of mental health services in schools. Because of the interplay with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), this issue has implications for special education services involving local and regional agencies.

CSBA will continue to review materials, proposals and legislation on the President's proposals and will work collaboratively with our federal representatives from the executive and legislative branches to develop sound programs to reduce violence.

CSBA is committed to working with association members and state stakeholder groups to address all the risk factors that impact the safety of students before, during and after school.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you would like additional information.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vernon Billy', with a stylized, cursive-like flow.

Vernon Billy
Executive Director

cc: Arne Duncan, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education
California Congressional and Senate Delegation