



Michael J. Martirano
Interim Superintendent
410.313.6677

Dr. Michael J. Martirano
Interim Superintendent, Howard County Public School System
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HB0760: OPPOSE

Handguns - School Employees - Handgun Permits and Carrying Weapons on School Property

As the Superintendent of the Howard County Public School System, I am here to vehemently oppose House Bill 760.

Every time a shooting occurs in a school setting, public discussion quickly pivots in two ways. The first is legislative reactions from both ends of the political spectrum on gun ownership – whether to strengthen ownership laws or enable and incentivize our educators to carry them. The second is the false sense of security where many in a seemingly safe community like Howard County say, “That could never happen here.” But the sad reality is that it can. We have seen time and time again a safe, secure school become the victim of senseless violence.

No one wants to see innocent children die yet again, in what should be the safest place on earth – our schools. Arming teachers with deadly weapons is not the way to do it. I began my career as a teacher and even to this day, I am a teacher first. Just as I did when I was a teacher, my responsibility as superintendent is to ensure that, our children receive the best possible education and care in a safe, nurturing environment. Teachers become teachers with that purpose in mind. They do not become teachers to serve as armed security or as law enforcement. As superintendent, I cannot expect my workforce to simultaneously be exemplary educators and armed security.

I appreciate the discussion today and thank members of the General Assembly for taking up the issue of school safety.

I firmly believe the only way to prevent school violence, is a multi-pronged approach that starts with collaboration between the school system and the community. I ask you to consider responsible ways in which we can secure our schools without making them even more dangerous.

Last week I held a School Safety and Mental Health Community Forum that was attended by more than 600 stakeholders including students, parents, police, health department officials, and local emergency management personnel. The topic of teachers carrying guns – this particular bill which, although not reactionary to the shooting in Florida, has gained popularity across the country in its aftermath – was one I addressed with clarity and purpose: I will not run a school system where teachers carry guns into our classrooms.

As educators, our teachers are heroes in their own right. We cannot, however, look to them as the answer to school safety. Their focus should be on the education of our children. With that comes an intrinsic responsibility to recognize bullying and other factors that may lead to violence in schools. However, the physical safety, including carrying a gun, is a role better served by our School Resource Officers, security personnel and community partners whose specific job is the recognition of and response to threats.

While no one has the answer to absolute deterrence, a robust approach, as discussed at our community forum, includes many levels. It starts with a conversation between stakeholders to identify the role we all play in prevention. First, we must better identify students in need of mental health supports and more promptly collaborate with families and community partners to ensure those supports are available and taken advantage of. If the proper supports are not available, then we must look to our county and state partners to expand access to a greater array of services.

Enhanced physical security is also key to deterring aggressive acts upon our students and schools. Through such measures as hardening school facility infrastructure, leveraging advanced technology solutions, enhancing emergency management policies in collaboration with local responders, and providing training for staff and students through active drills, we can establish much safer environments responsibly and effectively.

I know that events like the Parkland shooting incite a desire in all of us to do something. I encourage the General Assembly to look for ways to support the enhancement of physical safety of our school facilities and provide more resources for student supports - particularly around mental health.

However, perhaps the most critical piece of a well-rounded approach to school safety is the impact an increasingly negative society has on our children daily. While you can't legislate kindness and compassion, when we all, especially adults who set the example for children, recognize the importance of our actions and begin to treat each other with dignity and respect, only then will we truly see a decrease in violence in our schools.

I respectfully ask that this Committee give House Bill 760 an unfavorable report.

