

Testimony of
Dr. Gerald L. Zahorchak

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Secretary of Education
Senate Judiciary Hearing
National Constitution Center
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Thank You, Senator Specter, for holding this roundtable discussion on the important issue of school safety. You have been a leader in this area at both the national and local levels, and I am grateful that you have invited me here and given me the opportunity to talk with you today.

At the outset, I would like to tell you that although our schools are safe and have been made safer in recent years, there is still work to be done to further improve school safety. I would like to address specifically the important issue of student gang involvement.

Use of Data to Understand Student Behavior Problems As Well As Academic Achievement

In Pennsylvania, we have learned to use student assessment data to identify and address the causes of student academic problems. In the same way, it is critical that we learn to use data to identify and address the root causes of student behavioral problems.

Pennsylvania is now experiencing unparalleled success in raising academic achievement in every grade level and in every content area. Nowhere is that success more impressive than in our lowest performing schools. Pennsylvania schools that had less than half of their student population scoring proficient on the PSSA in 2001 have experienced double digit increases in proficient scores at every grade level and in every demographic group, including race, family income, language ability, and IEP status. In Pennsylvania, we know that our success has resulted from our relentless focus on examining student achievement data and asking serious questions not only about student achievement, but also about the educational practices that are most likely to have a positive impact on the students in a particular classroom, school, district, and community. We follow a plan of continuous improvement in which we increase the level of intervention in a school depending upon the severity of the school's need. This plan provides three levels of support: foundation support to all school districts, targeted support for districts that are struggling in particular areas and are on the school improvement or warning list, and intensive support for those school districts that need corrective action.

Since school safety concerns encompass such a broad spectrum of problems, I would like to take a specific example of a safety issue and show how it could be addressed using Pennsylvania's continuous improvement model. I've chosen the topic of "reducing and eliminating gang activity" as the example because there is significant research addressing the root causes of gang

activity that can be addressed by specific interventions, and also because gang activity constitutes a living example of a problem that requires intervention and collaboration across multiple agencies, such as schools, law enforcement, and social services.

Description of Gangs and Risk Factors

Sociologists differ on the specific definition of the term "gang"; however, the word as we know it generally describes a group of as few as five adolescents or young adults who gather, share an identity, use common symbols, and claim control over neighborhood territory. In addition, a gang may sometimes engage in illegal activities. Gang violence is no longer solely an urban problem. Some may be surprised to learn that, while all law enforcement agencies serving populations of at least 250,000 people must confront gangs, 30 percent of police departments in municipalities with as small a population as 2,500 people also have trouble with gangs.

To prevent a specific phenomenon such as gang membership, it is important to understand the root cause of gang membership: Why do kids join gangs? If we do not understand the reason for gang membership, we cannot prevent it. Research has shown two major reasons, or "root causes" why young people join gangs. First, these kids seek a sense of identity and fellowship. A gang provides its members with a degree of belonging the members think they cannot achieve outside of the gang's culture. In essence, the gang functions as an extension of, or substitute for, the family or the community. Second, and perhaps ironically, these kids seek safety. Kids who live in an area that is already overrun with gangs and who are subjected to gang violence often join gangs in an attempt to obtain safety and protection from the violence.

Acknowledging and Responding to Gang Problems

While it is natural for us to ask how we can suppress and intervene in gang activity, focusing on this question may cause us to overlook the best strategy we have: prevention. This is where schools can have their biggest impact. At the Pennsylvania Department of Education, experience has taught us that we can prevent a phenomenon (whether that phenomenon is poor academic performance or school violence) only if we understand and address or eliminate its root cause. We need to review the principles we have used to improve student academic performance and apply those same principles to the arena of student behavioral performance.

1. Levels of Prevention and Intervention

To help students overcome academic problems, we apply three levels of support depending upon the severity of the need. Similar to the foundation, targeted and intensive academic supports that the Pennsylvania Department of Education provides its schools and districts, we must engage in three levels of prevention and intervention to prevent young people from joining gangs in the first place, and to intervene in situations in which young people have already joined gangs:

? Primary Prevention, in which we target all youth and families, with a particular focus on youth up to age 14;

? Targeted Intervention, in which we target youth and families with particular risk factors for gang involvement, with a special emphasis on youth between the ages of 7 and 14; and

? Intensive Intervention, in which we target active gang members. Schools have access to a significant amount of data that can be used to evaluate a student's risk of becoming involved in a

gang. This data includes, for example, attendance rates, truancy rates, serious incident rates, behavior, grades, and suspension and expulsion rates. Schools can use this data to assess risk factors for violence and other behavioral problems, on both an individual basis and a school-wide basis, and address these problems early.

2. Prevention Efforts

Given what we know about the risk factors and root causes of gang membership, what are the best prevention efforts we, as educators and as a community, can provide? First, we can provide youth with more support earlier in their lives. It is critical that we reach kids at a young age, such as 7 and above. We need to give them opportunities to belong to something meaningful other than a gang. We also need to take kids' natural need for excitement and channel that need constructively - toward sports, academics, music, and positive community involvement. We believe mentoring is a valuable and proactive approach for youth development. The Department promotes mentoring partnerships between schools and community organizations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters, local YMCAs and YWCAs, Boys' and Girls' Clubs, and others.

We thoroughly support the vision you have, Senator Specter, of mentoring as a community effort in which we engage our partners in the business, industry, law enforcement, faith, and other communities. We would also like to include our older youth in this effort, by asking Our high school students to mentor younger students, so they can also provide a service for their schools and communities. We look forward to putting this vision into action to help all of our youth reach their fullest potential, while also improving the health and future of our communities. We thank you, Senator Specter, for your leadership on this critical issue.

The Department recognizes the value and importance of caring relationships and adult role models in the lives of our youth. We target support to struggling students by providing tutors through our Educational Assistance program so that, ultimately, all students achieve reading and math proficiency, graduate from high school, and are prepared for success in college and career. Strong models for quality tutoring include those that develop one-on-one supportive relationships between the tutor and student that lead to both academic and life success.

Second, we can help to strengthen families. Research has showed that 84% of gang members surveyed live with only one parent, and 65% of gang members have parents who work during the second or third shift. While these parents are outside the home and working hard to support their families, they may have difficulty monitoring their kids' activities. We can help by encouraging parents to be involved in their kids' lives. We can invite parents to participate in school programs, and when those parents are unable to participate, we can keep parents informed of their kids' school progress and involvement through notes, newsletters, and e-mails.

Finally, we can help to strengthen communities. Gang members who were surveyed said that gangs filled certain gaps in their lives. These young people stated, almost universally, that they had no good-paying job opportunities other than selling drugs and stealing. These kids said they were socially isolated and did not feel accepted in many places. The kids did not think they had anywhere to go or anything worthwhile to do after school, on weekends, and during the summer, other than become involved in a gang. Schools and communities need to help young people find better ways to fill these gaps, through good Job opportunities and school and community activities. A good example is the 21st Century Community Centers program that provides

Pennsylvania students academic and youth development activities to keep them active in music and athletics as well as enhance their resiliency through drug and violence prevention programs. Further, the centers extend beyond the students to the family and community by offering literacy and educational services.

General School Safety Efforts

In Pennsylvania, we have undertaken important new steps to increase our school violence prevention efforts. We work closely with our partners at the Pennsylvania State Police, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, and the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency to support schools in creating comprehensive safety plans and reviewing their internal programs for prevention. As you know, in Pennsylvania schools are required not only to have a safety plan, but to submit to the Department every year a summary of their school safety data. We collect and publish on our website school-by-school reports on violent incidents. We also provide technical assistance such as the Center for Safe Schools, our annual safe schools conference, and small, limited safety grants. In addition, in collaboration with our partners at the Juvenile Court Justices Commission and the Department of Public Welfare, the Department has introduced a stronger, more aligned approach and response to truancy, which includes a new policy statement, effective practices, resources, and strategies that can be used by all stakeholders, especially students and their families.

Our goal in Pennsylvania is to see all children succeed and be ready for post-secondary education or career, regardless of their background and circumstances. In strong partnership with the Department of Public Welfare and the Governor's Children's Commission, we are working to build resiliency in our students, classrooms, and schools using a model that promotes the following six key factors: high expectations; meaningful student engagement; connectedness and bonding; clear, consistent boundaries; life skills; and caring and support.

Although we continue to ask schools to improve their practices and implement an aligned, systemic approach to preventing school violence, we also acknowledge the importance of sufficient resources to support this important work. Last year, Pennsylvania suffered a 20% decrease in Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities grant funds, which has had a significant negative effect on schools. We are especially concerned that the President has asked Congress for a continued reduction and elimination of these funds, because they are essential in supporting local safety efforts. The importance of these funds cannot be overstated in helping our schools to be safe and secure so that kids are able to learn.

Pennsylvania's schools and communities must examine the causes of student behavioral problems in the same way that we examine the causes of student academic problems. By doing so, we can identify and address the roots of such problems early -- hopefully early enough to prevent these behavior problems from occurring in the first place. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today.