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Response, and Communications of the Committee on Homeland Security

Protecting Our Future: Addressing School Security Challenges in America

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### Introduction

Good morning Chairman Donovan, Ranking Member Payne, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I am Ben Castillo, director of the New Jersey Department of Education's Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today on behalf of the New Jersey Department of Education to highlight our efforts in school security.

I wish to convey to the Subcommittee, the regrets of our Commissioner, Dr. Lamont Repollet for not being here today, but I thank him for entrusting me with this important task. I know I speak for the Commissioner when I say that he is personally and professionally committed to school security. It's why he was named co-chair of the School Security Subcommittee for the NJ Department of Homeland Security and Preparedness. It's also why he was honored to provide an opportunity to attend this hearing to our summer interns, students who will be our next generation of teachers, principals, and parents who deserve a seat at the table to participate in this conversation. We are thrilled that many of them are here with us this afternoon.

As you may know, New Jersey has over 600 public school districts and charter schools encompassing over 2,500 schools. Additionally, there are over 1,400 nonpublic schools serving almost 225,000 students. This equates to approximately 1.6 million students in New Jersey's school daily. During the academic year, most of our children spend fully a third of their formative years in schools. It's not only where students learn, but it's also where they socialize with their friends, eat, and play – from kindergarten through high school. Recent tragic acts of school violence around the country remind all of us of our central moral and professional responsibility of keeping our children in a safe and nurturing environment so they can develop and mature to their fullest potentials.

### Administrative Code and Legislative Requirements

To that end, the NJDOE, along with its partners and stakeholders have been seeking to improve student safety through a multi-faceted and student-centered approach that builds positive school cultures and socio-emotional learning in addition to the security postures of school buildings within the K-12 realm. Together with our sister state agencies, including the Departments of Community Affairs, Health, Children and Families, Law and Public Safety, Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, State Police and many other federal and local government and non-government partners, we have established the Intergovernmental School Safety Group and we've made student safety a core part of our departments' value structure. This model captures the

Commissioner's improvement model of ACE: Assess, Create, and Execute. As a group we are assessing the school security needs of the State and creating and executing solutions.

For example, current administrative code requires districts to have written, comprehensive all-hazards school safety and security plans. These emergency operating plans are the cornerstones which are relied upon in emergencies; and from which planning, training, and drills are based. Legislative mandate also requires all schools to conduct a school security drill each month, in addition to the mandatory monthly fire drill. This may well represent the most robust school security drill schedule in the nation. Furthermore, a number of recent directives were passed which further enhance school security efforts. Many of these resulted directly from the work of the New Jersey School Security Task Force, an interagency group created by State law in 2014 charged with studying and developing recommendations to improve school safety and security. In addition to the adoption of the latest school security task force recommendations, the DOE provides guidance to further enhance school safety and security.

In our view, of the 14 issues studied by the task force; and of the 41 recommendations offered in their final report, the establishment of the New Jersey School Safety Specialist Academy and the associated School Safety Specialist Certification Program, are the most impactful. The enabling legislation requires each school district to designate a school administrator to be certified as a school Safety Specialist. These school safety specialists will be our most valuable points of contact in each school district with whom we can share information and make direct contact should situations warrant. They will be required to train annually on topics including bullying, hazing, emergency planning, emergency drills, drugs, weapons, gangs, and school policing. Additionally, as a result of concerns voiced by district personnel, we also included blocks of instruction on physical security, bomb threat awareness and response, security considerations for front office staff, school bus transportation, and others.

### NJDOE School Security Efforts

Through the Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning, the DOE has been diligently providing training, guidance, and assistance at the grassroots levels of our K-12 educational communities. Through our outreach efforts, we share preventative strategies and promising practices, and identified many security challenges faced by our schools.

Our unannounced drill observation initiative has provided opportunities for members of our office to collaborate directly with schools. Since the 2014-2015 school year, we have conducted over 850 such observations. This outreach has led to an increasing number of requests for technical assistance, which have resulted in members of our office providing professional development sessions for school staff and presentations to parent and board members, and other audiences. Our office has provided site-specific security observations, school safety and security plan reviews, and drill guidance. We've responded to 205 technical assistance requests, provided 121 presentations to educational organizations, and conducted 91 training assemblies. Just last week, the Governor underlined the State's ongoing commitment to school safety by signing a State budget that significantly increased the State's investment in Security Aid, allowing districts the flexibility to support school safety initiatives that fit the needs of their students.

While I can speak primarily to the Department's on-going work regarding school security, a holistic approach to ensuring the safety, including preventive efforts, is vital. The DOE

understands the importance of building strong, healthy, and positive school cultures through social-emotional learning. The NJDOE's prevention and intervention efforts to create an environment where students feel safe to learn, align with New Jersey's anti-bullying law. Districts are required to adopt and implement anti-bullying policies which include prevention, responding to allegations, and reporting. Each school is required to have a school safety/school climate team to focus on developing, fostering, and maintaining positive school climates. A School Climate Survey has been developed as part of a data-driven school climate improvement process to inform development and implementation of a School Climate Improvement Plan.

### Partnerships

We, along with our partner agencies understand that no single entity bears the responsibility, nor the possesses the capability to keep our students safe. There must be a concerted, comprehensive, continual effort to make and keep our schools as secure as possible. We have partnered with U.S. Department of Education and the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center, FEMA, our own Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, the New Jersey State Police, Department of Human Services, our respective County Prosecutors' Offices, local police, and others, in a collaborative effort to improve school security. In partnership with the Disaster and Terrorism Branch of the New Jersey Department of Human Services, we provided training in Comprehensive Active Shooter Incident Management for Schools which speaks to the importance of emotional components before, during, and after such horrific events. To enhance information sharing, the Office of the Regional Operations and Intelligence Center, in concert with our department and the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, developed Intelligence Dissemination Reports for the school sector. These were most recently provided following the aftermath of the school shootings in Parkland, Florida; in anticipation of the school walkouts which occurred across the nation; and prior to high school graduation ceremonies to provide situational awareness to schools throughout the state. We will continue to seek additional collaboration in efforts to more broadly face the challenges of school safety.

Finally, in an effort to learn from our colleagues around the nation who are all seeking to improve school safety and security in the wake of the track act of school violence at Parkland Florida, in May of this year the Commissioner and I attended a school safety training hosted by the Indiana Department of Education. It was an honor to be a guest of the Indiana Department of Education to learn how their school and district leaders engage state and national best practices in school safety. We look forward to attending additional professional learning opportunities in the future.

### Conclusion

Despite what seems to be a mounting tide of senseless violence occurring within our schools; schools overall, remain relatively safe places for our children. However, we cannot remain idly by and allow injury, both emotional and physical, and deaths to occur among our students. We must reject that this is the new normal, stem, and turn back the tide of school violence. We must pledge to do more.

Paraphrasing Commissioner Repollet: "...while we cannot control individual student behavior we [must continue] to provide guidance and support through training and resources to the school districts in order to identify promising practices and effective preventative strategies." This has

been our mission, and we, along with our partners and stakeholders in school security will continue to do so to the best of our abilities.

I again thank you for the opportunity to address this esteemed subcommittee.