



LEGISLATIVE BUDGET AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

EST. 1959

**A Study Pursuant to Senate Resolution 178:
A Review of Act 44 School Safety Initiatives**

Report Comments by Stephen Fickes, Deputy Executive Director
March 19, 2025

Good morning Madam Chair and members of the committee. It is a pleasure to be here this morning as we discuss a critical topic, which is that of school safety and the commonwealth's ongoing initiatives to improve school climate. By way of background information, Senate Resolution 178, sponsored by Senator Martin, requested a review of the school safety initiatives established by Act 44 of 2018. This act included a series of omnibus amendments that revised and added new sections to the Public School Code.

Before I dig into the findings of our study, I would like to highlight that while our primary emphasis was on Act 44-created programs, school safety includes a wide range of factors that extend beyond just this legislation. In fact, since Act 44's enactment seven years ago, eight additional Acts have expanded or built upon Act 44's original initiatives. Further, given the complexity of this topic, each initiative could have served as the basis for an in-depth study. As such, our study takes a macro-perspective, and where possible we try to highlight the interplay of the varying involved state agencies, which include: the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), the

Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP), and the Office of Attorney General (OAG).

Moving on to the main report findings, in section three, we provide an update on a key aspect of Act 44, the creation of the School Safety and Security Committee, which is part of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. This committee has 22 members and takes the lead in two important areas: (1) developing and approving baseline criteria standards for schools and (2) awarding grant funding. Regarding this latter aspect, we found the grant program has been very successful, with school participation increasing by 44 percent within the first three years of Act 44. Since 2018, over \$600 million has been granted to schools and organizations for safety initiatives, including mental health support. In the past four years, 54 percent of grant applications focused on mental health, driven by at least \$90 million allocated annually for these services after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In section four, we discuss our findings related to school safety assessments, which were expanded under Act 44 to include three types. The Committee, in consultation with field experts, establishes criteria for these assessments. Additionally, PCCD maintains a registry whereby school entities can contract with eligible providers, with funding available through the school safety grant program I mentioned previously. Alternatively,

eligible school entities may contract for a no-cost security assessment from the Pennsylvania State Police and its Risk and Vulnerability Teams or RVAT.

RVAT teams were another aspect created by Act 44. These teams consist of specially-trained troopers who in addition to conducting assessments on schools while in session, evaluate potential security weaknesses at critical infrastructure and houses of worship. Currently, a backlog exists in conducting school assessments, which the PSP is working to reduce. For example, the backlog was at its highest in 2021, at 590 assessments. Since then, the backlog has reduced, but as of last year, 533 assessments are still pending. Using PSP's data on existing workforce capacities, we calculated that an additional 10 RVAT members would be needed to eliminate the backlog, which we conservatively estimate would cost the PSP approximately \$1.8 million.

In section five, we review areas related to school climate and monitoring, including school security personnel, which is a broad term used to refer to: school police officers, school resource officers, and school security guards. More recently, these positions have taken on significance because Act 55 of 2024 required that in the 2025 school year, school districts must have at least one full-time, fully trained school security person or request a waiver from PCCD. We reviewed PDE data and found that using the broader term of school entity, 440 entities reported having no school security personnel. With

respect to school districts, 226 school districts reported having no school security personnel. As a result, this area will likely receive more attention as districts try to meet the requirement.

Another significant achievement of Act 44, and further discussed in the report, is the Safe2Say Something program. This program allows students and others to make anonymous tips about concerning behavior or events. Analysts within the Office of Attorney General receive the tips, gather additional information, and relay that information to the appropriate school entity. Since its inception, the program has received approximately 148,000 tips, reaching a peak of more than 32,000 last year. Each year, tips related to bullying and cyberbullying are the most frequently reported type of tip, with about 6,400 tips last year. Since the program's inception in early 2019, this tip category has grown by 80 percent.

With respect to how school entities are handling the referred tips, recent media attention in a few high-profile incidents has questioned how timely and thoroughly school entities may be responding to tips. We wanted to review data from the program to investigate this potential condition; however, confidentiality provisions in the law, which were cited by the Attorney General's office precluded us from doing so. Going forward, we recommend that there be stronger internal controls in place over how

school entities handle and resolve these tips. The report highlights five other states where such controls are in place. We also recommend periodic performance audits using aggregated information from the program as a means of ensuring compliance with expected outcomes.

Section six contains other recommendations beyond the Safe2Something program. One of these recommendations pertains to the mandate for school entities to have a designated school safety and security coordinator. According to Act 44, this position is an administrator, whose duties include being a primary contact for school safety issues, which in some larger school districts can be a demanding task. We found that other states also have requirements for similar positions, but four states go further and also require certification and ongoing training. To its credit, PCCD does provide annual training for coordinators, but we recommend that a certification track be developed to further advance and recognize this position.

Section six also presents other recommendations for future consideration, such as developing an annual report on school safety with metrics based on consolidated data from multiple sources, including grants, incidents, Safe2Say, and the Pennsylvania Youth survey. We also recommend further expanding school safety organizationally within

PCCD, establishing a youth advisory board for the school safety and security committee, and improving the school safety assessment process.

In closing, I would like to thank the numerous stakeholders and agency representatives with whom we spoke. In particular, I would like to thank representatives from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Pennsylvania State Police, the Office of Attorney General, and especially staff from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime Delinquency, who were unable to be present today. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the contributing members of our staff, as well as the primary team members, including Senior Analyst Matt Thomas and analysts Anthony Choi and Amy Hockenberry.