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## New York State Council of School Superintendents Statement on School Safety and Student Walkouts

**ALBANY** – School superintendents in New York State and across America take it as a personal obligation to all families to do everything possible to keep every child safe while they are at school, away from home. In the weeks since the horrible tragedy at Florida’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, superintendents and their local partners have been re-examining security in their schools and attempting to reassure families that no deficiency is being overlooked and no reasonable improvement will be dismissed. Our schools remain among the safest places for children and young people.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, lawmakers are understandably asking what they can do to help avert yet another, and to demonstrate their resolve in doing so. We hope for a thoughtful allocation of resources and responsibilities.

A first impulse may be to employ more school resource officers and to further “harden” school buildings against attacks. Superintendents will spare no effort of their own to maximize student safety, but more security personnel, equipment and facility enhancements may not be the best use of the taxpayers’ resources for all schools or circumstances.

Also, in striving to protect our children from terror, we must take care not to terrify them by the policies we would impose, such as mandated active shooter drills for the youngest children. New laws and policies must give local education leaders and their partners in law enforcement the authority to adapt and apply them with sensitivity to the families and communities they serve.

Finally, arming teachers and other educators would be an invitation to tragedy, either through an accident involving a child, a troubled student or school employee seizing a weapon, or police mistaking a gun-wielding educator for a perpetrator.

We recommend the following steps:

- Funding streams dedicated to school safety should be flexible, giving local leaders some discretion to determine uses most responsive to the circumstances of the communities they serve. Allowable uses should include, but not be limited to, employing school resource officers, making security improvements to school buildings, and expanding mental health and counseling services.
- The state also needs to increase funding for children’s mental health services, both within schools and in the communities beyond. Whatever their age, people suffering with mental health issues are no more inclined towards violence than others; they are more likely to be victims than aggressors. But along with other benefits, better mental health services might divert a troubled youth from a path otherwise leading toward

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tragedy. In the Council's seventh annual school finance survey this year, improving mental health services was the most widely cited funding priority among superintendents who responded.

- Any safety-related funding provided to school districts must also be made available to Boards of Cooperative Educational Services. Every day, over 100,000 students participate in programs offered by BOCES in 600 buildings throughout our state.
- To expand the pool of people available to serve as school resource officers, the \$30,000 limit on employment earnings while receiving a New York State pension should be raised or eliminated for retired police officers working as school resource officers. Requiring districts to obtain annual waivers from the earnings limit impairs their ability to continuously employ officers who have demonstrated aptitude for the role and have developed relationships with students. There must also be attention to assuring training for all new SROs.
- Prospectively, police collective bargaining agreements should not dictate which officers are assigned to school positions *without regard* to whether officers have the proper skills and training to deal with students in an effective manner.
- Governor Cuomo's proposed budget would extend for one more year a 10 percentage point reimbursement "bonus" in Building Aid for school security improvements; it should be made permanent. Year-by-year extensions make long-term planning challenging. The proposal to cap Building Aid overall should be rejected – it would impede districts from funding security improvements in their facilities.
- Expedite the process for reviewing and approving Smart Schools Bond Act projects, some of which aim to improve school security. Does the added step of approval by the Smart Schools Review Board serve an indispensable purpose?
- The most common way authorities learn about a weapon in a school is a student telling an adult whom he or she trusts. Creating positive school environments is the most essential step toward establishing those relationships. Some states and non-profit groups have also implemented anonymous "tip lines" which students may call.

On Wednesday of this week, students in New York and across the nation are planning a 17-minute walkout from schools to commemorate lives lost in Parkland and in school shootings elsewhere, and to support action to prevent more student deaths from gun violence. These events challenge school and district leaders to strike a wise balance which respects student expression, maintains order, and, above all, assures the safety of all involved. Superintendents and their colleagues should be listening to their students and communities and engaging them in plans to achieve that balance. Schools are places for teaching and learning and this is a time to teach and to learn.

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