Superintendents’ Survey Finds Wide Concern About Meeting Student Needs

February 2019

Each year for the past eight years, the New York State Council of School Superintendents has surveyed its members on financial concerns. For the last three years, basic questions on financial condition have yielded essentially stable results, showing neither dramatic improvement nor worsening of financial prospects for our state’s public schools.

But our surveys reveal high levels of concern among superintendents about the problems children and their families are encountering in life away from school, and about how their needs can be met.

One example: The most noted finding in our survey report a year ago was the surge in the number of superintendents identifying improving mental health services as a leading funding priority. The share of superintendents targeting those services as one of the top three funding priorities for their schools climbed from 35 percent in 2016 to 52 percent in 2017 and surpassed improving extra academic help as the most widely cited priority for the first time ever.

Improving student mental health services was again named as a priority by more superintendents than any other option in this year’s survey. The share of superintendents doing so also climbed again, to 56 percent.

In the aftermath of last year’s school shooting tragedies, we also added questions to learn what district leaders have been doing to make their schools more secure. The results reveal extensive activity, both since and before the tragedies, with further actions under consideration.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- 17% of superintendents reported that their district’s financial condition had improved over a year ago, down from 24% in 2017; 18% said their district’s financial condition had worsened, up from 13% in 2017. 65% reported no change.
- Asked to look ahead 3 years or so, only 24% expressed optimism about their district’s financial prospects, down from 29% in 2017. 7% said their districts cannot provide adequate services now – the same percentage as in 2017.
- As in 2017, improving mental health services was again the most widely cited priority for new funding, cited by 56% of superintendents as one of their top 3 priorities.
- Asked about aspects of child well-being, 67% of superintendents expressed a high level of concern about students’ mental/emotional health; 39% did so about family economic circumstances and 33% about readiness for kindergarten.
- The possibility of inadequate state aid was named by 47% of superintendents as their greatest concern in thinking about financial prospects for their schools, followed by hard to control costs such as pensions and health insurance (14%) and the tax cap (10%).
- 56% of superintendents named rising special education expenses as a significant problem, more than any other cost-related item.
- 59% of superintendents said that their district budget for 2018-19 will improve school security – the first time ever a majority of superintendents in our surveys anticipated improvement in any service.
- 89% of superintendents reported their district had taken some action in the 6 months following the Parkland tragedy to improve school security; 64% reported 3 or more actions.
Growing Concern Among School District Leaders About Student Well-Being

Districts have been responding to growing needs among their students: 49 percent of superintendents said their district budgets this year would improve student mental health services (38 percent reported no change; 11 percent anticipate some harm to those services).

Prior to this year, never had a majority of superintendents anticipated their school budgets would improve any student-related service. That did change this year – 59 percent of superintendents said their budgets will improve school security, attesting to another set of risks and underlying student problems with which schools and families must now contend.

But even with these advances, school leaders still worry about the capacity of their schools to give students all the help they need. Asked to what extent various expense-related issues are problems for their schools, 47 percent of superintendents named as a significant problem, “Capacity to help students in meeting non-academic needs, including, for example, health and mental health issues.” Only “Increasing cost of special education” was cited by more superintendents (56 percent) as a significant problem. That cost itself is likely one more indicator of growing needs among schoolchildren.

In our 2018 survey, we added new questions to inquire about the level of concern superintendents hold regarding various aspects of well-being among the children served by their schools. Statewide, 67 percent superintendents indicated a high level of concern about mental and emotional health and 29 percent indicated a moderate level, leaving only 4 percent expressing low concern; none said it is not at all a concern. Thirty-nine percent of superintendents indicated a high level of concern about the family economic circumstances of their students, as did a third regarding readiness of children for school on entering kindergarten.

On some of the aspects of child well-being, low percentages of superintendents statewide expressed high concern, but there were dramatic differences across regions and other classifications of districts.
For example:

- Statewide, 33 percent of superintendents indicated a high level of concern about students’ readiness for kindergarten, but 61 percent of Southern Tier superintendents did so, as did 57 percent of those in the Mohawk Valley.

- Statewide, only 9 percent of superintendents indicated a high level of concern about student homelessness, but 50 percent of city superintendents did so.

- Statewide, 14 percent of superintendents expressed a high level of concern about their students’ dental health, but 39 percent of Southern Tier superintendents did so, as did 38 percent of city superintendents.

- Superintendents leading small city, high poverty, Southern Tier, North Country and Mohawk Valley school districts were most apt to express concern about multiple aspects of student well-being.

The figures are, of course, perceptions of school superintendents about the circumstances of children served by their schools. But there is hard data to support at least some of these appraisals.

For example, even as enrollment has declined in most districts since 2006-07, numbers of students in poverty have climbed, resulting in dramatic increases in the shares of students who are economically disadvantaged. Long Island has had a 76 percent increase in the number of students qualifying for the federal Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) program since 2006-07 (the year the Foundation Aid formula was enacted). In the Mohawk Valley, the share of students living in poverty by that measure climbed from 39 percent to 55 percent over the same time span.

For all these reasons, the Council’s state budget advocacy for 2019 will emphasize the growing needs of schoolchildren and that every child, everywhere – urban, suburban and rural – deserves the best schools we can give them.

**Superintendents in their own words:**

**Southern Tier Rural:** The growing mental and physical health needs of students, both due to increasing levels of families living at or below the poverty level, impact our school and community significantly. These issues are directly linked to lack of employment opportunities in our area that provide a level of income needed to adequately support a family. This, in turn, is causing families with means to move elsewhere and is the main factor causing decreasing enrollment.

**Western New York Urban:** The demands placed on public education increase yearly. High poverty, mental illness, and opioid abuse have a significant focus and cost in public schools and the way we serve our students, families, and communities.

**North Country Rural:** We adopted a budget that was primarily based on the lowest level of needs in the hierarchy - food, safety and shelter - because of the significant needs presented by the community and the lack of access to these services.

**Finger Lakes Rural:** The costs associated with mental health, housing, and social issues for our students and families are not readily apparent in budget documents, but still pose a significant challenge to our success in getting students college and career ready.

**Long Island Suburban:** As poverty increases and special education and ENL [English as a New Language] student services increase, there is no change in the foundation aid formula. We have seen an increase in 30% in our poverty rate, but are still funded as though we do not have changing needs.

**Capital Region Suburban:** All students can succeed, but some students require additional (non-traditional supports) for that to happen. Examples: Summer School, Summer Early Literacy Academy, Summer ENL, well designed and effective Alternate Education programs, etc. Our district requires all of these extra components of support to achieve the results we have, it does simply cost more – almost year-round school – but it clearly works. I believe the state should work to design funding streams for schools which focus on these additional supports.

**North Country Rural:** I would encourage the powers in charge to come ride a school bus and see what our districts are really all about and mean to our communities. We are the hub of the community and if we don't provide the services and programs, there are no options for the children. Need to stop thinking we are all the same based on students/budget/ etc...

**Lower Hudson Valley Suburban:** People are quick to assume all schools in Westchester County are flush with resources. We have increasing numbers of families at the poverty level, an explosion of ENL students and soaring special education costs coupled with state aid increases that pale in comparison to other regions. We do not qualify for most of the opportunities coming from NYSED, which shifts the burden for innovation and growth to our taxpayers.
Since 2006-07, many school districts have experienced increases in student poverty and concentrations of poverty.
Priorities for New Funding

For the first six years of our annual school finance survey (from 2011 through 2016), the most widely cited priority for new funding among superintendents each year was “increase extra academic help for struggling students.” But that changed in our 2017 results, with improving student mental health-related services surging into the lead. It retains that position in our 2018 results.

“Reduce property tax levy” rose to become the second most widely cited priority in our 2018 results, regaining a position it last held in our 2013 survey. This year, the allowable levy growth factor in the tax cap calculation rose to its maximum possible level of 2 percent, also for the first time since 2013. Another factor driving increased attention to restraining property tax increases could be the new federal tax law’s $10,000 cap on deductions for state and local taxes.

The percentage of superintendents naming improving school security as a priority has swelled in the aftermath of last year’s tragedy in Parkland, Florida, with 25 percent of superintendents choosing it as a priority; the share had never exceeded 6 percent in any prior year, even in 2013, the year immediately following the horror at Newtown, Connecticut’s Sandy Hook Elementary School. Security enhancements were widely cited as a priority despite the fact that over half of superintendents said their 2018-19 district budgets would improve school security, as explained below.

**Superintendents in their own words:**

**Capital Region Suburban:** Uncertainty about levels of funding at the state and federal level make planning ahead very difficult. We need an adequate and dependable state aid formula.

**Finger Lakes Rural:** Adequate and predictable funding of state aid is absolutely critical.

**Southern Tier Rural:** As our community becomes more impoverished, the needs of our students become more costly to address and we can’t count on having enough in tax warrant to offset these rapidly increasing costs so we are even more dependent on state aid increases.

**Western New York Rural:** Without consistent and reliable increases in state aid we are facing a challenge that a weak local economy cannot support.

**Long Island Suburban:** Security and mental health spending have been top priorities - while a surge in infrastructure can be addressed with reserves, the state needs to be a better partner in ongoing costs. This is a new and growing concern that the State can’t assume is simply subsumed within its existing resources.

**Capital Region Rural:** Schools are triaging mental health challenges of students and we need more resources and programming options to help students.

**Lower Hudson Valley Suburb:** We have an obligation to serve ALL students, including our ELL’s [English Language Learners]. These students are NOT “draining resources” from other students or programs, but rather are a population we must serve effectively as part of our core mission... Our charge under the law, and in ethical terms, is to educate to the best of our ability all students who reside within our school district.

**Capital Region City:** Diverse city students living in poverty must be afforded the same variety of opportunities as suburban students. The playing field of funding is not equal and is therefore unfair.
The Council will support discrete state funding targeted at improving student well-being and school security, as well as other needs. But if 56 percent of responding superintendents would make improving mental health services a local funding priority, that suggests nearly half would not. Accordingly, our first priority must be to assure adequate general purpose aid, by updating and phasing-in the Foundation Aid formula.

Foundation Aid can be used to help districts fund ongoing operations and whatever emerging priorities local leaders and voters choose. Despite three years of aid freezes and other years of minimal increases during and after the Great Recession, the formula still generally drives the greatest aid per pupil to the neediest districts. But the formula was first enacted more than 10 years ago and much has changed:

- Schools did not operate under a tax cap when the formula became law.
- Student poverty has increased and other student needs have emerged.
- Some districts have fallen on to save-harmless, receiving more aid this year than they would if the fully phased-in formula were to run without change; but over 80 percent of these save-harmless districts are deemed average or high need.

The following table ranks the top three funding priorities according to the percentage of districts choosing each as a local funding priority, with the highest percentage at the top, followed by the next highest percentage and so on. The table also includes the weighted rank and score for each priority.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priorities</th>
<th>Rank 1</th>
<th>Rank 2</th>
<th>Rank 3</th>
<th>Weighted Rank (Score)</th>
<th>Choosing as a Priority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase mental health, counseling, social work, or similar services for students</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1 (382)</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce property tax levy</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2 (257)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase extra academic help for struggling students</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3 (166)</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve school security</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4 (155)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase funding of reserves</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5 (139)</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand or initiate prekindergarten</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6 (97)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase enrichment/advanced classes, including for example, access to Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and college dual enrollment courses</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7 (96)</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce class sizes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8 (73)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve facilities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9 (53)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand/improve career and technical education (CTE) opportunities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10 (52)</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create or add one or more &quot;Community Schools&quot; which would engage local partners to provide a range of supports to students and their families, keeping the school building open for extended hours.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11 (42)</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase health services for students (including dental health services)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12 (35)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extend the school day</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13 (32)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand professional development</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14 (28)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extend the school year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15 (25)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following graph illustrates the relationship between the student need/ability to pay index and the full phase-in aid per pupil with save-harmless, with an R² value of 76.3%.

**Foundation Aid generally provides greatest aid per pupil to neediest districts**

SOURCE: Council analysis of 2018-19 NYSED School Aid data; one district omitted
Overall Financial Condition

On questions concerning the general financial condition of schools, our survey results are similar to last year and the year before.

Every year, we have asked,

“Compared to one year ago, how has the financial condition of your district changed, in terms of its ability to fund services meeting expectations of parents in the community?”

Our first survey was done in 2011, a year when state aid had been cut by $1.3 billion. Seventy-five percent of superintendents that year reported their district financial condition had worsened. That figure declined in subsequent years. In the fifth annual survey, in 2015, more superintendents for the first time reported financial condition had gotten better, not worse (31 percent to 18 percent).

But here is a key point: never in eight years has more than 31 percent of superintendents reported improving financial condition. Accordingly, it is probable that some schools suffered great harm from the budgets enacted during the Great Recession and its aftermath and may have seen little recovery in the years since. Also, this year, the percentage of superintendents reporting worsened financial condition rose for the first time ever (from 13 percent to 18 percent).

Most superintendents report no change in financial condition this year, but most are pessimistic when asked to look ahead. In the last three annual surveys we have asked,

“Thinking ahead 3 years or so, how optimistic or pessimistic are you about whether your district will be able to fund programs and services adequate to the needs of your students?”

This year, only 24 percent of superintendents professed some degree of optimism, down from 29 percent in 2017. Altogether, 76 percent responded with pessimism, up six points from 2017.

As in 2017, 7 percent of superintendents answered that their districts cannot give students adequate services now – 40 to 50 districts which might be deemed educationally insolvent. School districts in this group are predominantly higher in student poverty and dependent upon state aid. In 90 percent of these districts over 40 percent of students were estimated to be poor enough to qualify for the free and reduced-price lunch program. Three-quarters of the
superintendents leading districts in this group identified the threat of inadequate state aid as their greatest concern in thinking about their district’s financial prospects; all but one cited rising levels of economic disadvantage among students as a concern.

**Superintendents in their own words:**

**Capital Region Rural:** We cut staff and program to the bone to survive. We are just starting to stand up again. If we need to cut again it will be an amputation.

**Mohawk Valley Suburb:** School districts have very little control over finances. The state controls more than 95 percent of our revenue between state aid and the state-imposed property tax cap. 75 percent of our expenditures are for personnel and it’s difficult to negotiate change with personnel costs given the Triborough amendment. Other costs are debt service, paper, heat, light and power. There is minimal control left for schools to make change except for cutting programs and services that are not good for kids.

**Long Island Suburb:** Rising special education, medical and pension costs will determine what we can or cannot afford to provide with regard to student programs moving forward.

**Lower Hudson Valley Suburb:** The district’s inability to control the big cost drivers (health, TRS, special education) coupled with stagnant state aid and unfunded mandates have created an unstable environment. Add the SALT deduction cap and the financial forecast is very troubling.

**North Country Rural:** The property tax cap poses a modest burden now, while the state and national economy are strong. However, given the cyclical nature of our economy, it is only a matter of time before an economic decline will dramatically increase the negative impact on the cap. See, for example, the experiences of other states with property tax caps -- California and Oregon... California's class sizes are the largest in the country. Oregon schools had to eliminate weeks of instruction at the end of the school year in the late 90s to avoid financial catastrophe. Is this what we want for New York’s outstanding school system?

**Capital Region City:** While many districts have financial struggles, some districts are still far from being able to even put a reasonable program of services together for children.

**Western New York Rural:** Long range planning for fiscal sustainability is necessary. It is almost impossible to sustain innovation with uncertainty in state aid in a high needs district.

**Impact of 2018-19 District Budgets on Student Services**

In each of our now eight annual surveys, we have asked superintendents how they see their district budget for that year affecting various student services. Results have generally resembled those for our question on change in overall financial condition.

In the initial years, superintendents were more likely to say services had suffered negative impacts. That began changing in 2014, with superintendents shifting from their appraisals from “negative impact” to “no change.” But never had a majority of superintendents anticipated that their district budget would have a positive impact on any area of student services – until this year. Responding to school shootings and resulting parent pleas, 59 percent of superintendents said that their district budgets for 2018-19 will improve school security. Nearly a majority of superintendents – 49 percent – anticipate a positive impact on mental health-related services.

Similar to responses to other financial condition questions, the percentage of superintendents anticipating a positive impact peaked for most services in 2016.
Problems and Concerns

Our surveys have also asked superintendents to what extent various finance-related issues are problems for their districts and what factors cause them concern in thinking about the financial outlook.

Most widely cited by superintendents as a significant problem for their school systems was the increasing cost of special education (56 percent), followed by capacity to help students in meeting non-academic needs, including health and mental health (47 percent).
Eighty-six percent of Mohawk Valley superintendents cited special education costs as a significant problem, as did 78 percent of Lower Hudson Valley superintendents and over 70 percent of superintendents leading high poverty, Southern Tier and city school districts.

City, Mohawk Valley, and Southern Tier superintendents were most likely to identify capacity to help students with non-academic needs as a significant problem.

Problems with teacher shortages are seen as most severe by superintendents in the North Country, Mohawk Valley, and high poverty school districts.

By a wide margin, the prospect of inadequate state aid was cited by the largest share of superintendents (47 percent) as their greatest concern in thinking about the financial outlook for their schools, followed by fixed or hard to control costs such as pensions and health insurance (14 percent), and the tax cap (10 percent).
Asked to identify any issue which caused concern in considering financial outlook, inadequate state aid, increasing special education costs, the tax cap, and rising levels of student poverty were most widely cited.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Check all that apply</th>
<th>Which causes the greatest concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate state aid</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing special education costs</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases in fixed or hard to control costs (e.g., pensions, health insurance)</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The tax cap</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rising levels of economic disadvantage among students (greater student poverty)</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional costs arising from state or federal mandates</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declining student enrollment</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High property taxes or perception of high property taxes</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak local economy</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing numbers of students for whom English is not their first language (ELL, ENL students)</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of new $10,000 federal cap on deductions for state and local taxes</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor or uncertain community support for the schools</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing student enrollment</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Please specify)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs due to students enrolling in charter schools</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this year’s survey, we included a few new possible concerns. For example, “impact of the new $10,000 federal cap on deductions for state and local taxes” was picked as a concern by 32 percent of superintendents statewide, but by 72 percent of superintendents in the Lower Hudson Valley, by 57 percent on Long Island and by 50 percent in the Mid-Hudson Valley. On the other hand, “weak local economy” was identified as a concern by 79 percent of superintendents in the Southern Tier, 60 percent in the North Country, 57 percent in the Mohawk Valley, and 37 percent statewide.

**Focus on School Security and Student Safety**

Several years ago, we asked our members what is the most important thing the public, policymakers, and the media should know about their work. Many of the responses were thoughtful and eloquent in describing the challenges and importance of leading school systems. But one response was particularly poignant:

“Every morning I wake up thinking, can we keep everyone safe today?”

Superintendents 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. The preeminence of that duty was highlighted once again by the horrible tragedy in Parkland, Florida and incidents which followed. Superintendents and their local partners have since been re-examining security in their schools and seeking to reassure families that no deficiency will be overlooked and no reasonable improvement will be dismissed.
The Council’s eighth annual survey of school superintendents on finance issues included a series of questions revealing the scale and scope of what districts have been doing to make their schools as secure as they can be.

**School Security Improvements Underway or Under Consideration**

Eighty-nine percent of superintendents responding to the survey said their districts have taken at least one action to improve school security in the six months following the Parkland tragedy in February 2018. Sixty-five percent reported their districts have taken three or more steps.

The most frequent actions reported are:

- Training of staff in school safety and security procedures, by 53 percent of districts;
- Expansion of student mental health, counseling, social work services, by 48 percent;
- Policy changes to improve security (e.g., building entry procedures, lock-down procedures), by 47 percent; and
- Arranging for additional school security personnel (employed either by the district or by a municipality); by 43 percent.

### HIGHLIGHTS ON SCHOOL SECURITY:

- 89% of superintendents report their district had taken some action in the 6 months following the Parkland tragedy to improve school security; 64% report 3 or more actions.
- 97% report having taken some action to improve security prior to the post-Parkland period. Over 70% report their district is actively considering some security improvement.
- 73% of superintendents report that their district has an arrangement for professional security staff in their schools; 56% report at least part-time coverage in all schools.
- Small rural, higher poverty school districts are least likely to have acted to improve school security and least likely to have professional security personnel.
- 59% anticipate that their district budget for 2018-19 will have a positive impact on school security, more than for any other student service areas and the first time in 8 years that a majority anticipated a positive impact for any area.
- Asked to rank 3 top priorities for additional local funding, 56% include improving mental health services, the most widely cited item for the second straight year; 25% include improving security, up from 5 percent in 2017.
- Recommendations for what the state could do to help include:
  - Fund School Resource Officers or other security personnel;
  - Provide more general funding for security or for technology or facility improvements and training;
  - Expedite process for approving Smarts Schools Bond Act proposals; and
  - Raise the earnings limit for retired police officers working in school security.
  - Provide more support for mental health services.

### What actions has your district taken or considered taking for the purpose (in whole or in part) of improving safety and security in its schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Approved in the last 6 months or so*</th>
<th>Approved previously</th>
<th>Actively considering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training of staff in school safety and security</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of student mental health, counseling, social work services</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy changes to improve security (e.g., building entry procedures, lock-down procedures)</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranging for additional school security personnel (employed either by the district or by a municipality)</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installation of security cameras</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction project(s) to improve security</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other changes to facilities, not requiring construction to alter buildings</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installation of emergency communications system</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption of other changes in student discipline policies and practices</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of &quot;restorative justice&quot; practices</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installation of metal detectors</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* in the 6 months between March and August 2018
The survey also asked what actions school districts had taken previously to improve school safety and which ones they are actively considering. A district might not have taken a specific action in the last half year because it had done so at an earlier time. We also found examples where districts had implemented steps to improve one aspect of security, and done so previously, and is considering doing still more in that area.

Among the security improvements implemented before the Parkland tragedy, installing security cameras was most widely cited, reported by 58 percent of superintendents. Next came training staff in security practices (49 percent), followed by policy changes to improve security (45 percent).

Looking forward, changes in student discipline were most frequently cited by superintendents as steps under active consideration by their districts now. Thirty-five percent of superintendents report their districts are actively considering implementing restorative justice practices in student discipline and 30 percent said other possible changes in student discipline policies and procedures are now under consideration by their districts.

As noted above, 59 percent of superintendents statewide anticipate that their district budgets will have a positive impact on school security, the first time in our eight years of surveys that a majority of superintendents predicted a positive budget impact for any student-related service.

**School Resource Officers and Other Professional Security Staff**

Our survey found that 73 percent of superintendents reported their districts have some arrangement for professional security personnel, either school resource officers (SROs) or other staff. There is variation in the extent of coverage. Twenty-five percent of superintendents reported having full-time SROs or other professional security staff in all their school buildings. Another 21 percent report having part-time coverage in all their schools, while 8 percent report a mix, with all schools having at least part-time coverage and some schools having a full-time security professional on hand.

Our question does not provide consistent information about the expertise or credentials of staff employed in these security positions.

Of the superintendents responding that their district does have some arrangement for school security personnel, 55 percent reported that all those professionals carry firearms, 10 percent answered that some do and some do not, and 35 percent said that none carry weapons.

**Breaking down the results**

Our survey allows examining trends among districts based on community-type (city, rural, suburb), student poverty percentage, enrollment, and region. Generally, we found suburban districts were most likely to have made security improvements in the six months following the Parkland tragedy, while city school districts were more likely to have taken action earlier.

For example, the proportion of suburban superintendents who reported having installed a new emergency communications system in the last six months was more than twice that of city superintendents (37 percent to 17 percent). But 67 percent of city superintendents reported their districts had previously installed a system, compared to 45 percent of suburban superintendents.
Similarly, the lowest poverty school districts (those with fewer than 20 percent of students estimated to be eligible for the Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) Program) were most likely to have made security improvements in the six months following the Parkland tragedy, while the highest poverty school districts (those with estimated FRPL percentages over 60 percent) were most likely to have made improvements earlier.

There is not much variation in the shares of districts undertaking some of the lower and non-recurring cost items, such as training staff or revising procedures. But lower poverty districts are more likely to have added security personnel or launched construction projects to improve security in the last six months. For example, 51 percent of the lowest poverty districts approved construction projects, while only 30 percent of those with more than 40 percent of their students in poverty have done so.

Districts in the second highest poverty level (FRPL percentage between 40 and 60 percent) were least likely to have made security improvements either recently or before. The accompanying chart illustrates this pattern for security personnel. This group is comprised primarily of small, rural upstate districts – 81 percent of the districts in this group were characterized as rural by their superintendents, 55 percent serve fewer than 1,000 students and 90 percent serve fewer than 2,500.

Again, 73 percent of superintendents statewide reported that their districts have some arrangement for professional security staff in their schools. Rural school districts are less likely than their city and suburban counterparts to have security professionals (63 percent versus 88 percent and 86 percent, respectively). Lower student poverty districts are about 10 percentage points more likely to have security personnel than those characterized by higher poverty, with the difference concentrated in high poverty rural communities.

What most strongly differentiates the likelihood of having school security personnel is district size, measured by enrollment, with coverage rising along with district enrollment. Again, these small districts are predominantly rural and higher in student poverty.iii

What Could State Government do to Help?

We concluded the school security section of our survey by inviting superintendents to share, “What actions, if any, could the state take that would be most helpful to your district in improving safety and security in your schools?” One hundred sixty-six superintendents responded, giving a total of 227 recommendations.

Over one-third of the superintendents (86) recommended some funding or action to increase the presence of School Resource Officers or other professional security personnel. Some recommended assuring one SRO for each school building, some called for assigning police to schools.
Fifty-three superintendents recommended providing funding to support security improvements in general, with some recommending funding specifically for technology or facilities and a handful suggesting funding for staff training.

Seventeen superintendents called for action to expedite processing of district proposals to use Smart Schools Bond Act funding, either in general or specifically for proposals aimed at improving security. Another six superintendents called for action to accelerate processing by the State Education Department of all capital projects.

Thirteen superintendents recommended actions to increase or improve mental health services and not only in schools. Whatever their age, people suffering with mental health problems are not more inclined to towards violence than other people; they are more likely to be victims than perpetrators. But along with other benefits, better mental health services might divert a troubled young person from a path otherwise leading toward tragedy. This question invited superintendents to recommend actions the state could take to improve security in particular. When we asked superintendents to rank their top three priorities for use of new funding in general, improving mental health services was cited more than twice as often as improving security.

**SUPERINTENDENTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS:**

**Mid-Hudson Valley City:** I think school systems do a good job after the fact. So they harden the schools, they get metal detectors, they seek out school resource officers and I think those things are necessary, but not as important as ... putting in practices and supports that students are aware of, that families are aware of where they can be tapped into before a deadly decision is made.

**North Country Rural:** People are safe when they feel connected to something else. We have worked very hard with mentoring programs so that every child has at least one adult, one advocate, one person who knows their name, their family background.

**Capital Region City:** Our best preventive practice against violence is intelligence. When kids share information with adults in the building, that’s when we know what we need to know in order to prevent something from happening, and kids don’t share that kind of information unless they have trusting relationships with the adults.

**Western New York Rural:** Do not make us make the decision between funding an SRO or funding an English teacher. Provide us with the necessary resources to have both.

**North Country Rural:** In our community we are the only place where 2,500 people are gathered in one area. Provide an on-duty officer.

**Finger Lakes:** Pass the bill so that retired police are not limited to 30,000 salary cap. Provide funding for ALL police departments so they can provide DARE/SRO’s to ALL school BUILDINGS, all day, all year. School safety should be a RIGHT, not a PRIVILEGE based on financial capacity on ANY district STATEWIDE (actually, NATIONWIDE). Sorry for screaming, I’m sick of “moments of silence” and want to scream about EQUITABLE school safety as loud as I can. And so should everyone else!

**Long Island Suburb:** The state must raise the $30,000 cap on retired police officers working in schools. Without a 211 waiver, at $20-$25/hour, our security personnel hit the $30,000 cap around May. This is a major issue.

**Long Island Suburb:** SROs cost upwards of $125,000 per SRO. With ongoing budget issues and a tax cap the only way to fund this is by reducing teachers in other areas... I would love to see adequate funding for SROs. In addition, I would love to see the max. salary of retired law enforcement increased to $50,000. Allow Districts to partner with the Sheriff to hire the right person for the job and allow the retired law enforcement officer to work the school calendar.

**Finger Lakes Rural:** Quicker funding for the Smart Schools ..., example: we are installing digital security cameras with remote access for the Police Department and administrators in all schools.... we are doing the work in phases due to funding delays.

**Lower Hudson Valley Suburb:** Stronger guidelines and/or vendors added to state contract list that have been vetted. There are many options available for security add-ons with

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**Survey Finds Wide Concern About Student Needs**

**February 2019**

**What actions, if any, could the state take that would be most helpful to your district in improving safety and security in your schools?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Number Recommending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fund School Resource Officers/Other Security Personnel (including assigning police to schools)</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide funding for security improvements -- flexible funding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to support security improvements in general; targeted funding for training, technology and/or facility improvements</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expedite processing of Smart Schools Bond Act funding approvals</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve mental health services</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise earnings limit for retired police officers working in schools, related issues</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun safety legislation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expedite State Education Department processing of facilities projects</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance on best practices, vendors, facilities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interagency collaboration</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorize districts to require counseling; expedite Family Court PINS [Persons In Need of Supervision] process</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion from tax cap for security improvements</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One way of helping districts to arrange for additional security personnel would be to raise the limit on how much retired police officers can earn while collecting their pensions and working in a school. This was recommended by 12 superintendents. A complementary action would be to eliminate the need for annual waivers from the earnings limit, so that school districts could be assured of continuing the assistance of particular officers who have proven effective in the role.

Seven superintendents recommended some form of gun legislation, a few specifically referenced so-called “red flag” proposals to enable courts to consider petitions from police officers, educators, family members and others to remove weapons from the possession of individuals deemed dangerous.

There were also recommendations for clearer state guidance, both on best practices and on which vendor products might be deemed acceptable. A couple superintendents recommended stronger interagency collaboration, either to improve services in rural areas for children and families, or to establish consistency within a region so that police agencies would have a better sense of what to expect when responding to a school emergency.

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**SUPERINTENDENTS IN THEIR OWN WORDS:**

**Capital Region Rural:** We need the funds to construct security vestibules and aid to support security personnel. Two years ago, the district responded to the community outcry for security which costs us nearly $250,000 which was not in that year’s budget. Additionally, providing security for after school events increases our costs. We need financial assistance.

**Southern Tier Rural:** Release Smart Bond and provide capital funds to expand these projects. Create a program for retired police officers to work in our district with aid through BOCES or some other aid stream. Pass legislation where a district can legally mandate counseling and fast track the ridiculous PINS process.

**Capital Region Suburb:** Provide financial assistance to the mental health system in New York State. They need more training for professionals to meet the needs of the community. Continue to support gun control.

**North Country Rural:** Provide additional funding for LCSWs [Licensed Clinical Social Workers]. Since we are the community center, we can provide access to these services without a negative impact from transportation. The outreach of the LCSWs could extend into the community. Fund additional programs that foster a community sense of belonging and parenting services...

**Western New York Rural:** I would encourage the various State agencies to collaborate in our rural regions. For example, have the county sheriff’s office coordinate a regional response and safety plan. Have the county mental health service agencies work directly with the schools, perhaps having the state provide resources to offset the cost of space and personnel.

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1 This is how regions are defined in the Council’s survey reports:

- **Long Island:** Nassau, Suffolk Counties
- **Lower Hudson Valley:** Putnam, Rockland, Westchester Counties
- **Mid-Hudson Valley:** Dutchess, Orange, Sullivan, Ulster Counties
- **Capital Region:** Albany, Columbia, Greene, Rensselaer, Saratoga, Schenectady, Warren, Washington Counties
- **Mohawk Valley:** Fulton, Herkimer, Montgomery, Oneida, Schoharie Counties
- **Central New York:** Cayuga, Cortland, Madison, Onondaga, Oswego, Tompkins Counties
- **North Country:** Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence Counties
- **Southern Tier:** Broome, Chemung, Chenango, Delaware, Otsego, Schuyler, Steuben, Tioga Counties
- **Finger Lakes:** Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, Wyoming, Yates Counties
- **Western New York:** Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Niagara Counties

2 In this report, “high poverty” refers to districts for which over 60 percent of their students are estimated by their superintendent to qualify for the federal free or Reduced-Price Lunch Program.

3 Results for one district enrolling more than 10,000 students have been omitted. It was not clear from the response what arrangement for security personnel is currently in place.