



Testimony at Legislative Study Commission to Evaluate and Provide Recommendations on Mandated Safety Protocols for Rhode Island Schools
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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to thank Representative Jennifer Boylan for initiating this legislative study commission to look at evacuation and lockdown drills in Rhode Island schools and their impact on student safety and mental health. We also appreciate the efforts that she and the entire commission have made to do outreach to the community to get input on this crucial discussion.

Ensuring the safety of students and school staff during lockdown and active shooter drills is vital for preparing for potential threats of violence within or near a school. The [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#) recommends that *children's participation in crisis exercises should directly benefit them and their peers, rather than just benefiting adults or first responders*. For example, if the exercise is for adult responders, such as law enforcement or medical providers, to practice their roles, mannequins or adults playing the role of children should be utilized. These activities should also occur outside regular school hours.

Lockdown and active shooter drills, as emergency procedures, aim to minimize harm during significant threats. However, it is important to consider best practices recommended by the AAP, the Association of School Psychologists, and other organizations with expertise in children's mental health and development. These practices include promoting social-emotional learning, fostering a positive school climate, providing treatment for behavioral health concerns, training educators, having enough mental health providers, and conducting interdisciplinary threat assessments.

- **Considering the developmental stage of children** involves having multidisciplinary teams, including professionals like pediatricians and experts in child development and behavioral health. Actively seeking input from students, diverse school staff, parents, and community partners ensures an inclusive planning process that supports their needs.
- The Association of School Psychologists suggests **a hierarchy of preparedness strategies** starting with discussion-based exercises before thinking about complicated (in-person or live) drills. The inclusion of school mental health professionals in planning helps minimize distress for all participants.
- **Special consideration for the unique needs** of young children, trauma survivors, and those with disabilities which may include exemptions from specific drills or exercises when participation might be overwhelming.
- **Building trust and reducing anxiety by** maintaining open communication and providing advance notice of drills to parents, students, and staff members, helps eliminate unnecessary trauma and confusion.
- **Emphasizing prevention by addressing social-emotional learning,** promoting a positive school culture, and offering mental health support is

essential. Adequate investment in educator training and threat assessments supports overall school safety.

- **Grounding safety products and interventions in research** is fundamental, especially given families', educators', and the public's school safety concerns. For example, investments in bulletproof barriers or shelters designed to protect an entire class, essentially serving as panic rooms in the event of a school shooting, are regularly being considered. However, the effectiveness of such purchases has not been properly evaluated or studied.

Creating a safe learning environment during lockdown drills involves careful planning, community input, research, and an understanding of best practices. It is important to think about what children most need and to focus on preventing harm. By listening to students, school staff, and educators we can make sure these drills keep students both physically and emotionally safe.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for seeking and considering testimony from the communities this issue most affects.