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MAKE TENNESSEE THE LEADER IN SCHOOL SAFETY

We are working to make Tennessee the top state in the nation for public education. We must also make Tennessee the global leader in school safety. The National Institute for Justice data suggests that school crime rates have dropped nationwide in schools since the early 1990s. This may be attributed to several causes, certainly, the inclusion of school resource officers has been a positive factor. However, high-profile school shootings and other tragic incidents have gained national attention.

For educators, issues such as bullying, harassment, and school discipline policies impact school safety daily. The [homeland security digital library](#) states that 75% of school shooters felt bullied/persecuted/threatened by others.

We have witnessed numerous active shooter incidents in our state and are aware of statistics by the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation that tells us that on average, a gun is found every three days in Tennessee schools. Schools and districts must develop, implement, and regularly evaluate a school-wide safety plan to ensure that it employs research-based strategies to keep all adults and children safe. Protocols typically include one-way entry and exit, alarm systems that immediately notify law enforcement, security cameras, strict guest policies, even clear backpacks.

School leaders have to make certain that schools are safe places and they can meet the unique safety challenges each school may face. We have to be prepared to better protect students and faculty across the country from danger, including active shooter situations. School safety policies must be flexible and practical. Every viable option that can lead to a safer environment in our schools and communities should be on the table. School safety is not an issue you can just do once and be done---it has to be an ongoing effort to evaluate school safety practices. Debra Moody, state representative for District 81, and the Chair of the Education Instruction Committee of the Tennessee House of Representatives has been relentless in addressing these safety issues.

As we have seen far too frequently, our schools are easy targets for those who wish to harm others. When premeditated attacks and school shootings occur, they are usually over within minutes. Most of the time law enforcement is simply not able to respond quickly enough to the event and lives are needlessly lost. Schools have to protect people immediately in initial critical moments when there is no help. A school must regularly plan emergency preparedness solutions, including but not limited to, prevention, deterrence, and defense with step-by-step response solutions. In school safety, there is no room for error.

School leaders are responsible for safety. However, school officials must work hand in hand with law enforcement professionals in their community on these critical matters. Most law enforcement officers in this

SUMMARY

In order for Tennessee to be the top state in education, it must also become the leader in school safety as well.

country perform their very difficult jobs with respect for their communities and in compliance with the law. Along those lines, we must better define School Resource Officer (SRO) programs, what we want them to accomplish, and better analyze how we measure their effectiveness. We are seeing urban areas move away from SRO's as the issue is politicized. It is unfortunate.

Law enforcement attempts to prevent the occurrence of criminal activity, especially if it could damage another human being or the general public. Protecting adults and children in our schools is mission-critical in public education. School officials must yield to law enforcement experts to ensure that suspected criminals are treated fairly and in a manner that complies with the law when a crime occurs on school property.

Collaboration with all parties is essential for school safety. Working together we can detect, deter and defend our schools and communities. It is common sense to understand that no two schools are identical. That means no two schools will have the same school safety features. Replicating security plans from one school to another is not advisable.

[Matt Estridge](#), a counter-terrorist expert from Knoxville, Tennessee, points out, "Each school is going to have a different footprint and different issues, positive and negative." Educators and law enforcement officials must continually meet the challenge of creating and maintaining a safe environment for students and adults in our school buildings. He adds that we must have "intuitive strategies for any environment for laypersons, including special needs and handicapped persons."

Estridge stresses that proactive planning and approach "protects people in those first critical minutes while giving law enforcement enough time to arrive." Estridge teaches an active shooter countermeasures program which includes school security assessments and custom emergency action plans. Security assessments like Estridge's are something every school and district should look at regularly to reduce to help avoid future tragedies.

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JC Bowman is the Executive Director of Professional Educators of Tennessee, a non-partisan teacher association headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the association are properly cited. For more information on this subject or any education issue please contact Professional Educators of Tennessee. To schedule an interview please contact communications@proedtn.org or 1-800-471-4867.