



AIA
Pennsylvania

TESTIMONY
SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Public Hearing on Improvement of
Student and School Safety

March 2, 2018

SAFER SCHOOLS BY DESIGN

Good morning Chairman Eichelberger, Chairman Dinniman, and members of the Senate Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to you today regarding the vital issue of ways to improve student and school safety. AIA Pennsylvania is submitting written testimony on increasing safety in our public schools through design. There have been many suggestions for how we can make our schools safer. We want to add our voice to this conversation.

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AIA Pennsylvania, a component of the American Institute of Architects, represents the voices of nearly 3,000 registered architects throughout Pennsylvania, with many of our members nationally-recognized authorities on school planning and design.

The recent school shooting in Florida continues an unsettling trend of assaults on students in their neighborhood schools. While the debate will continue at the national level on proposals for arming teachers and “hardening” our schools, in Pennsylvania, we need to have the conversation on what can be done to make our students safer at the schools in our communities while maintaining a nurturing learning environment.

Two ideas that can be implemented immediately are, the establishing of a statewide emergency management plan for the design and configuration of school buildings and security infrastructure, and the publishing of an assessment tool to use as a guideline for school districts to gauge priorities. We suggest a group to develop these assets that would be made up of architects, contractors, teachers, students, and law enforcement.

One of the largest concerns regarding school safety in Pennsylvania is the age of our schools. More than 65 percent of schools in Pennsylvania were built before 1970 as reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Education School Facilities Survey in 2014. That’s before the energy crisis, before computer technology, and certainly before active shooter drills became part of our students’ lives. Many of these buildings have been renovated over time to upgrade their services, educational opportunities, and safeguards. But far too many have not.

As school architects, our members have walked through numerous facilities that do not have even the most basic safety measures. Examples include administration offices remotely located from unmonitored school entrances, exterior doors that lead directly into classrooms, classrooms unable to be



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properly locked down, and lack of security cameras both on the campus and inside the building.

Over the nearly 20 years since the Columbine tragedy, school security equipment and protocols have evolved immensely, and architects have responded by developing best-practices for the design of resilient, secure facilities that not only protect our students, but help them thrive in a nurturing learning environment.

School safety and security can be addressed through comprehensive planning and by integrating building features that also serve to provide comfortable learning environments, address environmental design criteria required of specific geographical locations, and fire and wind resistance. Architects do all this and foster places that are intellectually and mentally uplifting and promote social wellbeing.

A locked vestibule at the main entrance enables all visitors to be formally screened before gaining access into a school. Security cameras provide real-time video to district administrators and police. A building-wide communications system allows anyone anywhere in the school to warn everyone of a security threat. Classrooms with a strong, solid door and a robust locking system secure the space from an intruder. Site design to control and improve visibility at access points including alternative entry points for first responders and flow of parking and drop off/pick up zones. Use of laminated glass with blinds and full window screens or shades to infuse natural light into spaces without sacrificing security. Dual purpose safe rooms designed to be utilized for everyday recreational group work and provide a shelter in place function in an active-shooter situation. Use of durable materials such as masonry and reinforced glass at intruder breaching locations, outer perimeter configurations that enhance perimeter security while blending into the overall environment.

Beginning in 2016, AIA Pennsylvania began a series of [public forums](#) designed to [bring together experts in the field of school construction](#) including state legislators, school superintendents, general contractors and architects. Initially intended to support the debate on PlanCon, this series of presentations showcases the complex facets of school construction in the Commonwealth, including a panel devoted to school safety with Keynote Speakers, Svigals + Partners, the architects of the re-designed Sandy Hook Elementary. [Plancon](#), a state-run reimbursement mechanism for local school construction, can be a means to help pay for safer school design and construction.

The conversation about keeping our children safe is complex and spans many subjects. But there are tangible steps we can take right now to make our buildings safer. Teachers, students, school district leaders, emergency personnel, and school



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architects must team together to implement current security practices as well as continue to explore new methods to keep our children safe. AIA Pennsylvania intends to continue our ongoing dialogue to find workable solutions to safeguard our school children.

AIA Pennsylvania recommends updated safety assessments that focus on school facilities in the Commonwealth to gain a better understanding of the scope of work that needs to be done to secure our schools.

In closing, as a professional organization that represents architects, we do not have all the answers to solving the problems of violence and terrorism in our schools. One thing we can provide is our voice as designers, creative thinkers, and guardians of public health, safety, and welfare. Has your school district been designed to keep your students and teachers safe?

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. Please keep AIA Pennsylvania and our members in mind as a resource as the discussion around school safety continues.

Sincerely,

Stephen M. Swarney, J.D.
Executive Director, AIA Pennsylvania