

## Vermont Senate Committee on Education

Don Tinney, Vermont-NEA  
January 25, 2023

For the record, I am Don Tinney, a 31-year-veteran English teacher from South Hero, currently serving as president of Vermont-NEA. I have also served on the Vermont School Crisis Planning Team since 2018, but I am not a spokesperson for that body. While representatives from VSBA, VSA, and VPA, along with VTNEA Executive Director Jeff Fannon, will address specific policy issues with school safety legislation, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss some general ideas about this critical topic.

In a webinar with a former Secret Service psychologist, members of the school crisis planning team learned that a healthy school climate is the single most effective strategy to prevent school violence. When every school is a sanctuary for every student, all students feel as if they belong to their community, a school where they are safe and welcomed.

In their 2021 report titled *Averting Targeted School Violence*, the U.S. Secret Service pointed out that “In every case, tragedy was averted by members of the community coming forward when they observed behaviors that elicited concern.” The report stated that “Students are best positioned to identify and report concerning behaviors displayed by their classmates.”

While it is important to have policies in place that promote school safety, we also know that the practice of “See something, say something” within the student body is a proven strategy to avert tragedy. This is why we must be committed to generating and maintaining a welcoming and safe school climate, where all students have healthy interactions with their educators as they build trusting relationships with the adults in their lives.

Dr. Robert Waldinger, director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, has concluded that “Positive relationships are essential to human well-being;” and “good relationships keep us healthier and happier. Period.” He also states in his latest book that “a teen’s relationships with adults may be more critical than at any other time in life.” We need to assure that no policy nor practice will interfere with the invaluable relationship between students and their educators. This, by the way, is one of the reasons we must solve the problem of educator vacancies, because so many of our educators are overextended and stressed because they must cover the responsibilities ordinarily covered by other educators and, as a result, might miss the opportunity to have those important conversations with their students.

Representing nearly 12,000 active Vermont educators, I would like to call your attention to the options-based response section of the proposed legislation. I believe you heard the logic in moving from traditional lockdowns to an options-based response in earlier testimony and learned that the classroom teachers will be deciding what option to exercise in the event of a threat to school safety. Please note that this is a major change in strategy and has caused increased levels of stress and anxiety among many of our educators. In a traditional lockdown, an educator follows the directive of the administrator or law enforcement official—lock the doors and windows, pull the shades, turn off the lights, gather students in the safest corner of the room.

While these lockdown drills are nerve-wracking for educators, who are reminded that they have the lives of their students in their hands, individuals are following basic directives. In the options-based system, educators must make split-second, life-or-death decisions with very little information. I'm sure you can appreciate the dilemma our educators will face in the options-based approach. We need to have this legislation somehow address this change in expectations of educators. With stop-the-bleed training and practices, we are expecting our educators to be EMTs. With an options-based approach, we will now expect educators to make decisions that trained law enforcement officers make. Educators will need training and coaching in this new system.

Educators who make life-or-death decisions in a matter of seconds cannot be held liable in any way. The liability section of Vermont education law, 16 VSA § 1756, must be amended to specifically exempt from any exposure or liability an educator who makes such a decision in a crisis.

After participating in the Behavioral Threat Assessment training, I see the value and the effectiveness of this approach to prevention. When I see the list of the personnel expected to be on the team, however, I see people who are already overextended and exhausted. Where will our school counselors, school nurses and school principals find the time to conduct these assessments? These assessments demand urgent and effective data collection, and I am not confident that all our teams will have the capacity to perform this important function without shortchanging other areas of their work. There should be a mechanism to evaluate a school district's capacity to conduct these assessments with fidelity and then provide administrative or investigative support as needed.

Social media posts and digital communications will most likely be part of some individual Behavioral Threat Assessments. We collectively need to further examine the impact that the various social media platforms have on school violence, including rampant vandalism. While I do not see how this could be explicitly incorporated into this legislation, it certainly is part of the problem we are all trying to solve.

Thank you. I welcome any questions.

### **Vermont's "See Something, Say Something" PSA Campaign**

<https://vtdigger.org/2019/04/08/students-spread-see-something-say-something-campaign-psas/>

### **U.S. Secret Service Resources**

*Averting Targeted School Violence*

<https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2021-03/USSS%20Averting%20Targeted%20School%20Violence.2021.03.pdf>

*Report on Mass Attacks in Public Places*

[uss-ntac-maps-2016-2020.pdf \(secretservice.gov\)](https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2016-2020/USSS-ntac-maps-2016-2020.pdf)