

TASK FORCE ON SCHOOL AND CAMPUS SECURITY
Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the 2023 Interim
November 1, 2023

Call to Order and Roll Call

The fifth meeting of the Task Force on School and Campus Security was held on November 1, 2023, at 2:00 p.m. in Room 131 of the Capitol Annex. Senator Max Wise, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Representative Scott Lewis Co-Chair; Senator Max Wise Co-Chair; Senators Matthew Deneen, Michael J. Nemes, Reginald Thomas, and Stephen West; Representatives Savannah Maddox, Scott Sharp, James Tipton, and Lisa Willner.

Guests: Tim Hays, Executive Director, Office of Safe Schools, Florida Department of Education; and Steve Miracle, Superintendent, Marshall County School District.

LRC Staff: Yvette Perry, Peter Wright, and Maurya Allen.

Chair Wise thanked members, staff, and KET for being present and part of the preparation of the meetings. He also thanked the audience, especially those representing Moms Demand Action.

Approval of Minutes - October 19, 2023

Senator Deneen made a motion to approve the minutes of the October 19, 2023, meeting of the task force. Representative Sharp seconded the motion and it passed by voice vote.

Chris Hixon, Coach Aaron Feis, & Coach Scott Beigel Guardian Program

Tim Hay, Executive Director, Office of Safe Schools, Florida Department of Education, and Daniel Ellinger, Deputy Legislative Affairs Director, Florida Department of Education, were present to share about the Chris Hixon, Coach Aaron Feis, and Coach Scott Beigel Guardian Program. The Guardian Program was created following the shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglass school and is named for teachers who lost their lives protecting students during that tragic event.

Florida's guardian program allows individuals to serve as armed guardians to deter and stop active assailant incidents on school premises. These can be employees who

volunteer to serve as school guardians or those hired specifically for that purpose. The 144 hours of training for guardians is provided through local sheriff's offices. Program participants must achieve an 85 percent pass rate on the firearms training and pass a psychological evaluation, drug screening, and background check. Since its inception, the program has been appropriated \$25 million in state funds. The majority of the funding goes to sheriff's offices to cover applicant training costs. The program is very flexible and allows local school districts to adapt over time.

In response to a question from Chair Wise, Mr. Hay said some guardians are employed by the district and get a salary based on their service as a guardian. Other guardians are currently employed by the school district and take on the guardian role as an additional responsibility. The guardians serve on school campuses, which may encompass school events held on school grounds. Armed security guards do serve in this role, in full uniform, and are hired by the school districts. However, guardians do not have arresting authority. That authority still remains with school resource officers (SRO).

Responding to a question from Senator West, Mr. Hay said teachers who are willing to go through the program can serve as guardians. The program initially garnered a lot of attention and the flexibility was really key in getting schools to adopt it. In the last three years, schools in Florida have adopted a layered approach to school security. Some districts utilize armed security in uniform, with additional teachers and administrators trained as guardians serving at the same school.

Responding to questions from Representative Tipton, Mr. Hay said there is a requirement for ongoing in-service training through the sheriff's offices, and this includes training on a firing range. He added that the only authority and function for a guardian is to respond to an active shooter event. Based on his experience, Mr. Hay said that school boards vote on participation in the program and typically adopt it as a measure to increase safety and security in their schools.

In response to questions from Representative Sharp, Mr. Hay said he is not aware of any instance where a guardian needed to be removed. However, the local sheriff's offices administer the program and ensure that there are no issues. Since implementing the program, there have not been any instances when a guardian was needed to intervene in an active shooter incident. Guardians are not openly identified to the school community, except in instances where guardians are those in uniform similar to SROs.

Responding to questions from Senator Deneen, Mr. Hay said there is no centralized data collection on guardians by the Florida Department of Education. Local sheriff's offices

collect the data on a local level and he can reach out to them for that data to provide to the committee. Senator Deneen said that information would be useful to know how effective the guardian program is and if there are any concerns.

In response to a question from Representative Willner, Mr. Hay said the state would receive any information on a gun being fired by guardians or other school security officers. He said he did not have the data at hand, but the number is very small and would include the number of shots fired by school security officers.

Responding to questions from Chair Wise, Mr. Hay said the guardian program is named for individuals who were put into a position that no one could imagine or understand. School professionals and teachers are heroes and giving those that desired it a way to expand their role was a key driver for creating the program. The 144-hour training is the minimum level of training and many sheriff's offices incorporate additional training addressing mental health. Many states have reached out to Florida to understand how the program works and are looking to create similar programs. Florida does provide a \$500 stipend for guardians, funded by the state.

Safety Management

Steve Miracle, Superintendent, Marshall County Public Schools, shared about a program Marshall County uses to filter electronic activity from students either in classroom submissions or through school communications. The program is called Gaggle and uses an algorithm to search for language that indicates mental health disturbances, profanity, pornography, or violence. In his experience, moving to digital environments for learning, there is more opportunity for students to engage in risky behavior and language. Prior to having a tool such as Gaggle, the district used a less responsive tool and there were a high number of false positives and a lack of ability to be proactive.

Gaggle utilizes an algorithm which identifies a potential communication and creates report, upon receipt of report, a person employed by Gaggle does a primary evaluation on whether it is an innocuous communication or needs further investigation. A second review is performed by another Gaggle employee who has the ability to further investigate and identify the individual student who sent the communication. Gaggle contacts school personnel, sometimes including SROs, for further follow-up. Mr. Miracle briefly shared responses from school level personnel regarding their experience with Gaggle. They still have false positives, but they are more efficiently vetted, and any time intervention can be made early, it is worth it.

One elementary principal said that there were several incidents where situations of self-harm were prevented and students were diverted to mental health supports early. Mr. Miracle also shared insights from Mr. Cope, who lost a child in the Marshall County school shooting, who said there is no price too high to protect children and save a life. He also shared a very personal instance of Gaggle identifying a 5th grade student considering suicide who received support and now is flourishing. He said that response alone was worth the cost of the program.

Responding to questions from Chair Wise, Mr. Miracle said the annual cost for the program is approximately \$25,000 and the school board had to approve purchase of the program because of the expense. Marshall County school board initially used ESSR funding, and he hopes to be able to appropriate general funds for the cost when the ESSR funding expires. The tool is not an opt-out system, because the district owns all their IT infrastructure and communications made through that system. None of the Gaggle reports are made available to anyone outside the home school, it is not even distributed throughout the district. Resource officers within a school may be included, as are some local law enforcement agencies, but it is not shared between schools or to the Center for School Safety.

Responding to questions from Representative Tipton, Mr. Miracle said the cost does breakdown to approximately \$5-6 per student. He added that he has not had anyone reach out to him about the program, and he does not want to advertise for Gaggle specifically, because different districts have different budgets and there may be other tools that function just as well. However, he feels that safety of students is foundational to their success and one of the most important tasks of the school to provide. Students are aware that their information is being monitored, but that has not appeared to change their behavior in such a way to make the monitoring obsolete.

Senator Nemes thanked the presenter for his foresight in this matter and said not publicly advertising the program is probably allowing students to reach out by way of the tool when they would not feel comfortable reaching out directly.

Discussion of Task Force Recommendation Possibilities

Senator Thomas spoke to the discussion of school nurses from last meeting and gave his full support to funding the \$4.4 million necessary to provide every school with a school nurse.

Chair Wise said the task force had reached out to interested parties such as Dr. Sheila Schuster, Dr. Joe Bargione, Jon Akers with the Center for School Safety, and Marshal

Wilcox for recommendations. He said there is no formal adoption of recommendations by the working group, but the recommendations will be taken back to leadership and members for further consideration.

Representative Willner said that she wished to endorse the recommendations from Dr. Schuster, Dr. Bargione, and others to strengthen existing law around preventative strategies for school safety.

Chair Wise reiterated that the recommendations are not an exhaustive list, and members are welcome to continue to bring suggestions to him, Co-Chair Lewis, or staff.

Adjournment

With no further business to come before the task force, the meeting adjourned at 3:09 p.m.