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Pennsylvania lawmakers look at dozens of bills to improve school safety after Parkland



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Apr 5, 2018



File photo shows the Pennsylvania Capitol in Harrisburg, where lawmakers and Gov. Tom Wolf continue to wrestle over the lack of a state revenue plan.

Associated Press

In the last seven weeks of intense local and national debate about school safety, Pennsylvania lawmakers have discussed armed security guards and bullet-proof glass, metal detectors and mental health screenings.

One animated hearing in the state Capitol touched on a school districts' efforts to **equip students and staff with rocks** to throw at intruders.

Few options have been left off the table.

Lawmakers have introduced or given new life to dozens of [bills](#) intended to make schools safer in the aftermath of the Parkland, Florida, school shooting that left 17 dead.

Up for debate now will be which ones move forward in a General Assembly that often struggles to pass major legislation — and how lawmakers will fund any changes in a state consistently criticized for not giving schools the money they say they need.

“I guarantee you there will be action,” said Lee Derr, director of the Senate Education Committee, which is working on a package of school safety-related bills to present later this month.



POLITICS

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How have state lawmakers responded to Parkland?

At least 16 bills in the House and four bills in the Senate have begun circulating in Harrisburg as a direct result of the Feb. 14 school shooting, an LNP review found.

Roughly two dozen other bills, introduced earlier, are also attempts at alleviating violence in schools and could gain new momentum in the coming months. Those include Republican Sen. Don White’s [often-discussed Senate Bill 383](#), which would allow school districts to arm teachers and staff.



POLITICS

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New bills under consideration, such as a proposal from Monroe County Republican Rep. Rosemary Brown, would seemingly expand on White’s idea.

Brown's bill would require at least one armed safety officer in every school at all times. It would also mandate metal detectors at primary entrances and require every person entering the building to be screened.

The bill by White, of Indiana County, narrowly passed the Senate, 28 to 22, last year and is now in the House. Gov. Tom Wolf said he would veto the bill if it reached his desk, and some school officials and organizations, such as the Pennsylvania State Education Association, also oppose it.



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Mental health

Under a different proposal from Brown, every student in grades 2 through 12 would be subject to annual mental health screenings performed by a school or family physician.

It's one of several bills aimed at recognizing student mental health issues that could potentially become safety concerns for others.

Sen. Scott Martin, the first-term Republican representing the southern half of Lancaster County, said he's about to introduce one such bill.

The legislation would require that a child who makes terroristic threats undergo a psychiatric evaluation before he or she can be released, Martin said. He said it's partly a reaction to Parkland — where the shooter had previously made threats — and also to the recent case at Penn Manor High School, where a student was charged with making threats and was released by the Office of Juvenile Probation instead of being detained.

When a child is charged and not detained, it can take months before court dates are set and those kinds of psychiatric evaluations are completed, said Martin, a former director of the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center.

Money for school safety?

How the cash-strapped state would pay for security guards, metal detectors and mental health screenings is largely unknown.

A few bills would expand the Safe Schools Initiative, which is funded with \$8.5 million in the state budget.

Two bills from Rep. William Kortz, a Democrat from Allegheny County, call for a slight increase in the state's personal income taxes in order to add \$30 million to that pot.

A proposal from Delaware County Republican Sen. Tom McGarrigle would redirect money coming from fees people pay to file government documents — such as deeds, property transfers or legal documents — to go instead toward the safe school grants. He projected it would raise \$50 million.

In another bill, schools would get trauma bags, tourniquets and corresponding training through emergency preparedness grants, according to Bucks County Republican Rep. Frank Farry's legislative memo.

Derr, the Senate Education Committee director, said much of the discussions in the coming weeks, as lawmakers decide which bills to push, will be about funding.

“With a more than \$30 billion budget, I am hopeful the other legislators, staff and governor's office can work together with me to make this happen and be their priority as well,” Brown said in a statement announcing her legislation.

Longer-term approach

The funding deadline Brown and others will be trying to beat is June 30, the last day before the new fiscal year.

And with another budget battle looming, several officials are asking for an extended review of which policies should be changed or added — and how much they'll cost.

That's the gist of the School Safety Task Force that Wolf and Auditor General Eugene DePasquale launched in mid-March.

The group will hold meetings around the state with school officials, teachers, parents, students, law enforcement, health professionals and others. A final report will determine, in part, funding needs and the effectiveness of mental health programs and active shooter trainings.

Wolf's spokesman, J.J. Abbott, said the regional meetings have yet to be scheduled, but the plan is to finish them by the end of June so the results can inform budget discussions.



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TOM KNAPP | Staff Writer

Other school safety reviews could take months or years.

One offered by Sen. Martin —conducted by the Legislature’s nonpartisan research arm — would take up to six months.

He and Berks County Republican Sen. Bob Mensch have introduced a resolution to require the Joint State Government Commission to evaluate the effectiveness of schools’ gun-free policies and background check systems.

It would also look at schools that have undergone a security assessment by the Pennsylvania State Police, and whether those schools followed the voluntary recommendations.

“No doubt in my mind we’ll get that one done for sure,” said Martin, who is also working on a bill establishing a new program similar to See Something, Say Something, which encourages people to report suspicious activity to law enforcement.

Regarding the state police assessments, Major Douglas Burig said during a March 2 hearing in the Senate Education Committee that his office had conducted them for 97 schools last year.

Their recommendations are sometimes for the schools to implement closed-circuit television monitoring, or better internal communications in times of crisis, he said.

Most of the time, schools follow the recommendations, he testified before the committee. When they don’t, he said, it’s sometimes because they can’t afford it.



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