

The Honorable Steven R. Rothman (NJ-9)
Testimony on H.R. 2352, the School Safety Enhancements Act of 2007
House Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security
April 17, 2008

I would like to thank Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gohmert, and the Members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to testify before you in support of H.R. 2352, the School Safety Enhancements Act of 2007.

Far too often, Americans turn on the television or open up the newspaper and learn about yet another school shooting or fight. It has become a tragic reality that guns and other weapons are being brought into schools all across America. Children are forced to wonder whether they are safe in school -- a place once thought to be a guaranteed safe haven.

Whether it is fighting terrorism or working to keep our schools free of violence, I have always believed that the government's first responsibility is to protect the people. Our government must help to ensure that our children are safe and protected from violence of any kind in school. School violence is a real danger, from New Jersey to California and everywhere in between, and in my view the federal government has an obligation to help local municipalities and property taxpayers cover the cost of implementing new school safety initiatives.

That is why in 2000, as a member of the House Judiciary Committee, I, along with then Judiciary Chairman Henry Hyde (R-IL), started the Secure Our Schools program. Secure Our Schools is a matching federal grant program administered by the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office, of the Department of Justice. Under this program, specific security measures are not mandated by the federal government. Rather, the funds assist local school districts with the costs of those measures they choose to enact. Secure Our Schools gives grantees the opportunity to establish and enhance a variety of school safety equipment and/or programs to continue to improve school safety efforts within their communities.

Secure Our Schools grants may be used to install metal detectors, locks, improved lighting, and other deterrent measures that will help keep students safe. With walkthrough metal detectors available for \$1,750 and handheld wand metal detectors available for \$145, just to name a few of the security measures that can be taken, significant progress can be made in preventing weapons from being brought into our schools, while saving local property taxpayers from bearing the full cost of these security initiatives. Secure Our Schools addresses a variety of existing and emerging problems relating to school security through responses that range from traditional to innovative and rely on both new technology and the experience of school administrators and law enforcement professionals.

In response to the tragic events that took place at Virginia Tech one year ago yesterday, I introduced H.R. 2352, the School Safety Enhancements Act of 2007. The School Safety Enhancements Act would make several changes to the Secure Our Schools Program. Most notably it would:

- Increase the federal share of elementary and secondary school security upgrades to 80% and lower the local responsibility to 20%. This will ensure that even those localities that are cash strapped can afford to protect their children without raising property taxes.
- Allow for the funding to be used for the creation of hotlines for the reporting of dangerous situations, which have proven effective throughout many school districts across the nation.
- Increase the authorization level of this critical program to \$50 million annually which, if appropriated, would allow a large number of additional schools to obtain grants.
- Require all institutions of higher education to develop, on an annual basis, a campus safety assessment and implement of a campus emergency response plan to address a number of emergency situations such as natural disasters, active shooter situations, and terrorist attacks.

Since 2002, Secure Our Schools grants have been awarded to a total of 572 law enforcement agencies that have partnered with more than an estimated 2,400 schools in 50 states and territories. In the past year alone, 152 law enforcement agencies received grants to improve their school safety and security measures.

With over 14,000 law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and 95,615 public K-12 schools in the nation, increased funding would clearly allow us to reach a larger number of children and communities.

A secure school environment provides young people with an educational environment free from unnecessary distractions, and full of opportunities to learn. When children know they are safe at school, they can focus on what is being taught in class, and thus excel with their schoolwork. I developed the Secure Our Schools Act in direct response to concerns over school safety expressed to me by children, parents, and teachers from my Congressional District. They wrote to me asking for my help to keep students safe in their schools. As the father of two public school children myself, these letters touched me deeply and I felt compelled to take action. I hope you will also join me in this fight to ensure that each and every one of our schoolchildren is kept safe from harm.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I look forward to working with you to pass the School Safety Enhancements Act of 2007.