School Safety

Benjamin Erwin, Research Analyst I, NCSL Education Program

School violence continues to captivate a national audience as the country grapples with ways to address what has become an all too common reality. State legislatures have not shied away from this difficult topic and have endeavored to enact meaningful legislation that seeks to prevent, mitigate and respond to acts of school violence.

The 2018 legislative session saw just under 400 bills and resolutions related to school safety proposed, with almost 90 bills enacted or adopted. Legislation addressed issues ranging from school resource officers and improving infrastructural security measures, to threat assessments and the coordination of student mental health services.

In the hopes of providing a resource for legislators, the NCSL Education Program developed a comprehensive School Safety webpage that includes a legislative tracking tool that allows users to search for legislation by state, bill status, party of the sponsor and topic. In addition to the comprehensive legislative tracking tool, the school safety webpage includes a 50-state review of statute addressing firearms at K12 schools, as well as an analysis of policies for arming school personnel. The tool is updated weekly and will continue to be updated with legislation proposed in the upcoming session.

State legislatures took on the issue of school safety head on in the 2018 legislative session, while a similar vigor is expected heading into the 2019 legislative session. The following legislative summary provides an overview of trends identified using the legislative tracking tool, which may serve as a preview of what is to come.

- Legislative Summary
  - 392 bills and resolutions were proposed in 43 states in the 2018 Legislative Session
  - 80 of these bills and 7 resolutions were enacted or adopted in 36 states.
  - Legislation covered topics ranging from arming school personnel to increasing access to mental health services.
    - 47 bills and resolutions in 24 states were proposed that addressed the topic of arming school personnel. 3 of these bills and resolutions were enacted in 2 states (44 bills in 20 states).
• 65 bills and resolutions in 27 states were proposed that provided for the development of emergency response plans. 17 of these bills and resolutions were enacted in 14 states.
• 47 bills and resolutions in 21 states were proposed requiring or mandating the content of emergency drills. 8 of these bills and resolutions in 7 states were enacted or adopted.
• 84 bills and resolutions in 29 states address school resource officer (SRO) regulations and training. 16 of these bills and resolutions in 13 states were enacted or adopted.
• 72 bills and resolutions in 29 states were proposed that addressed school building security infrastructure. 21 of these bills and resolutions were enacted or adopted in 16 states.
• 56 bills and resolutions in 25 states were proposed that would increase access to student mental health services. 17 of these bills and resolutions were enacted or adopted in 13 states.
• Legislatures also included suicide prevention into the discussion of school safety. 15 states enacted 21 bills related to suicide prevention initiatives that included grant funding, training for school personnel, prevention protocols, and the coordination of intervention services.

Some states, including Maryland and Florida, took a comprehensive approach to school safety, enacting legislation that encompassed various approaches to increasing the safety of their schools:
  • Florida Senate Bill 7026
    • Senate Bill 7026 (SB 7026) establishes the Coach Aaron Feis School Guardian program, codified the Office of Safe Schools, institutes collaboration requirements for school districts and law enforcement, and requires the formation of school threat assessment teams headed up by the school’s school safety specialist. The legislation also requires the Office of Safe schools to administer additional grant funding and develop model safety assessment and mental health training programs to assist districts in the development of their own school safety plans and in the provision of student services.
  • Maryland Senate Bill 1265
    • Senate Bill 1265 (SB 1265) establishes school resource officer (SRO) requirements, including the presence of an SRO at all Maryland schools as well as a mandatory SRO training that includes instruction on bias, disability awareness, school climate, interacting with students, and cultural awareness. In addition to SRO requirements, the legislation allocates grant funding that can be used to staff an SRO in addition to infrastructural improvements, the coordination of mental health services and safety evaluations. SB 1265 requires the districts to form a threat assessment team and assign a school administrator the role of school safety coordinator and mental health coordinator, consistent with the model policy and expertise provided by the Maryland Center for School Safety.

The federal government also recognized the significant role of state legislatures on the issue. Led by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, the federal commission on school safety has actively engaged with state legislators and NCSL to explore a wide array of policy options. DeVos emphasized the importance of enacting context-specific policies that account for the unique needs of each state:

“Many state legislators are deliberating on this very topic right now, formulating policy and plans unique to their situation. We know there is no one-size-fits-all approach,” says DeVos.

With a final report from the commission set to be released at the end of the year, states have already taken massive strides in ensuring the safety of America’s students.

For more information:
Ben Erwin, K-12 Research Analyst (State Policy)
303-856-1362
Benjamin.Erwin@ncsl.org

Joan Wodiska, Senior Federal Affairs Counsel (Federal Policy)
202-624-3558
Joan.Wodiska@ncsl.org