

Statement of Ranking Member Donald M. Payne, Jr.

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications Field Hearing

“Protecting our Future: Addressing School Security Challenges in America”

July 9, 2018

As a parent of triplets, the concerns regarding school security has kept me up many nights. Tragically, school violence has taken the lives of far too many American children. It has been 19 years since the Columbine High School massacre, which left 13 victims dead, and sadly our children are still incredibly vulnerable while attending school.

Unfortunately, there has been a significant uptick in violence in our nation’s schools in the last two decades. The 2012 Sandy Hook shooting left a staggering 20 children and six adults dead, yet Congress fell short of passing legislation to combat gun violence in schools. This year, there was about one school shooting a week in this country, including the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida that left 14 children and 3 teachers dead. Still, the response from Congress and the Trump Administration has been lacking.

Beyond making more grant funding available, Congress has done little to address the issue of keeping guns out of the hands of bad actors targeting schools. Even funding is not guaranteed. As we speak, the House Appropriations Committee is planning to consider an education spending bill that would cut school safety spending by \$110 million.

The idea of cutting financial support around school security amid the uptick in violence in and around schools is unconscionable. It is also worth noting that these proposed cuts come at a time when Congress is increasing spending for its own security. I hope my Homeland Security Committee colleagues will join me in opposing cuts to school security funding. I hope to hear today from our witnesses about what Congress needs to respond to the threat of school violence with the urgency needed.

Additionally, in looking at the issue of school safety, we need to be mindful that many children in urban settings experience safety threats daily, which impacts their school performance. We need to incorporate violence and the threat of violence children experience in urban areas into the conversation of school safety.

I have introduced legislation (H.R. 3613, the Safer Neighborhoods Gun Buyback Act of 2017) to address neighborhood violence and keep weapons off the streets. I would welcome the support of all Members on this important bill.

While many challenges remain at the Federal level, I am pleased to say that New Jersey is one of the leading states in school safety. New Jersey has implemented all the major school security measures identified by the Secure Schools Alliance. Further, New Jersey has recently passed a series of gun safety measures, making it a leader in gun reform. It is my hope that New Jersey will continue to set the example in this area.

In my time on the Committee this is the first hearing that we have had on the issue of school safety. Mr. Chairman, I hope we can continue to work together to ensure that our Committee will see this issue as a homeland security priority.

I thank all the witnesses for attending today’s hearing. I look forward to hearing what each of you are doing to address and further protect children in all communities around the country facing challenges around school violence. We must do more to protect the next generation. This country and communities, like the ones I serve, are counting on us.