


TO: Members, Joint Legislative Audit Committee
FROM: Sharon L. Schmeling, Executive Director 
DATE: January 29, 2020
RE: School Safety Grants and Plans, Audit Report 19-28

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the Legislative Audit Bureau's report on school safety grants.

My organization, the Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools (WCRIS), testified in support of the audit last year when you authorized it. We represent 100,000 students in over 800 schools across the state and applaud the legislature's leadership on school safety.

We were one of the first groups the LAB interviewed in their thorough and excellent process. We encouraged LAB auditors to survey the schools to get input about what they thought of the program and were happy to see in this final report that they took our suggestion.

I've met regularly with Department of Justice Office of School Safety staff in the past year, and am a member of their School Safety Advisory Committee, and their School Critical Incident Response Team group.

We are working closely with the DOJ to help our schools access training on trauma informed care, which helps educators identify students in need of intervention before their desperation could lead to violence. We also support the agency's efforts to increase educators understanding and schools use of threat assessment, which seeks to identify students whose actions may signal an emerging threat to community safety.

That's all well and good and should continue. I'm here today to highlight the portions of the audit that raise some issues that need additional attention by the Legislature.

First, WCRIS supports the recommendation that school safety plans be updated every three years instead of annually. The Audit's comments on this, and reasoning for the recommendation, are accurate.

The LAB also points out that best practices underscore the need for secure buildings. It notes that prevention by controlling access to schools decreases emergencies. Research shows access is best controlled through modern locks, metal doors at main entrances, intercoms, bells, alarms, two way radios and public address systems. Further, research shows that classrooms and the students inside are kept safer by solid core doors with locks.

Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Association of Christian
Schools International

Christian Schools
International

Diocese of Green Bay

Diocese of LaCrosse

Diocese of Madison

Diocese of Superior

Lutheran Church
Missouri Synod
North Wisconsin District

Lutheran Church
Missouri Synod
South Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Association
of Independent Schools

Wisconsin Conference
of Seventh Day Adventists

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Northern Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Western Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical
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Yet, the LAB acknowledges (p. 45) that most school administrators have unmet safety needs and that local law enforcement was more satisfied with safety at public schools than at private schools. This is not surprising given the LAB's report that less than 50 percent of private schools got safety grants (p. 4).

The LAB also notes that law enforcement said it is more likely to provide school safety assistance to public schools than private schools (p. 58). As a result, law enforcement is not as satisfied with physical security measures at private schools as it is with public schools (p. 62). We believe our schools' frugal and efficient cultures may be at the root of this lack of collaboration. Our school principals may not want to waste law enforcement's time to come to their school to tell them what they already know: that the school needs basic security improvements that it can't afford.

Finally, the LAB says private schools need more support and suggests that DOJ consider ways for providing additional support to private schools (p. 63).

Based on these findings, WCRIS urges this committee to support legislative efforts to provide another round of school safety grants to specifically help the 446 public, charter and private schools that did not receive grants to harden their buildings, as has already been done for hundreds of schools (p. 15).

We have urged Attorney General Josh Kaul to support such efforts. He has expressed an openness to that discussion. We are recommending that the DOJ replicate the first round of safety grants, with the same conditions and timelines as followed in that process. However, we would urge that the grant deadlines not be at the beginning or end of the school year but in November or December, which school leaders have said is actually a better time for them to do such paperwork and would allow for greater participation.

Our schools are simply staffed. Many principals also teach. The time it takes to apply for the grant, collaborate with law enforcement and then get estimates from contractors is significant. A change in deadlines would help facilitate that. Also, by replicating the first round of grants, we'll enable these new schools to draw on the experience of other private schools who have already received a grant and can help them navigate the DOJ's online grant application process, which can be intimidating and overwhelming to many small schools.

Funding a third round of safety grants at the same level as the first would cost an estimated \$9 million and cast a safety net over the last group of vulnerable school buildings, and the students, staff and parents inside.

We urge you to support this effort to make all of our schools and school children safe and to educate and urge your legislative colleagues to do the same.

Thank you.