

**Testimony of Vincent Pompei
Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and the Workforce**

**“Protecting Students and Teachers: A Discussion on School Safety”
February 27, 2013**

My name is Vincent Pompei. I am a school counselor in southern California. I started out as a middle school teacher and became a school counselor to pursue my passion: making school a safe and inclusive place for *every* student.

My story is the story of millions of students all across America.

By 5th grade, I had been targeted and labeled as gay. I was teased, pushed, and spit on. Knives were pulled on me and my bike was stolen. I became depressed, considered dropping out, and by the 11th grade, had already attempted suicide twice.

My teachers looked on as I endured bullying and homophobic slurs. I honestly don't think they knew how to intervene appropriately.

I didn't feel safe – because I wasn't.

I desperately needed an adult I could trust, but it was far too risky to seek out support. And I had no idea how to go about finding help – there was no information, not even a sticker or poster with a phone number to call.

All through those years, I searched and prayed for just one person to make me feel safe. I never found that person during those years, but it drove me to want to become a teacher, and then a school counselor – to become that person for my students.

Mass shootings like the one at Sandy Hook Elementary School make headlines, but they are rare. Students are far more likely to encounter gang violence, bullying, and harassment in everyday life. They need access to counseling, support, and other mental-health services to cope with those kinds of experiences and much more – for example, when Dad is beating Mom, when they become homeless, when they're thinking of dropping out, when a parent is deported.

But now, caseloads have grown so much that counselors only have time to put out fires – when we should be preventing fires from igniting in the first place. The situation is the same for nurses, psychologists, social workers, and other school-based mental health professionals.

The recommended ratio of students to counselors is 250-to-1. In California, where I live, the ratio is more than 1,000-to-1 – a caseload not even Superman could handle! In Minnesota, it's nearly 800-to-1 and nationwide, nearly 500-to-1. (Source: [American School Counselor Association](#)).

For some of our students, especially the most vulnerable, the resulting loss of services will have lifelong consequences. In the short run, an emotional wound may be less visible than a physical injury. Over the long run, it can fester and become crippling, like a cut in the skin or a broken bone that is not cared for properly.

Meanwhile, evidence mounts that mental well-being and academic success go hand in hand. A recent meta-analysis of school-based social and emotional learning programs – more than 270,000 K-12 students were involved – showed participation in such programs improved grades and standardized test scores by 11 percentile points, compared to control groups. (Source: [National Association of School Psychologists](#))

When students feel safe and connected at school, they are more likely to learn. Yet most educators get no training – we call it “professional development” – in what it takes to create a school climate that nourishes mental well-being as well as academic success.

If our nation is serious about keeping students safe, that has got to change. We must do more than react after the damage has been done. We must invest in professional development that acknowledges the need for “preventive care” – a healthy, safe, and inclusive school climate.

Every member of the school staff needs to know the basics: Who is statistically most likely to be a target of bullying, harassment, or violence. What to expect when a kid has a traumatic experience – whether it's a hurricane, violence at home, a shooting at school, or bullying. How to counsel and change the behavior of bullies or those who behave violently.

Every member of the school staff must be equipped to respond appropriately and effectively to a student who is troubled or potentially violent. Instead of playing guessing games, it should be routine for educators to receive instruction in creating a healthy, safe, and inclusive school climate – just as it is routine to receive instruction in first aid for cuts and bruises, in what to do when someone chokes on a piece of food or struggles to learn algebra.

Instead of standing silently by when students shun or ridicule someone who is different, school staff should lead by example. Embrace diversity. Address problems before they escalate. Show students how to resolve conflicts in non-violent ways using research-proven strategies.

In short, we need to take teaching students to be good citizens as seriously as we take academics.

To help keep schools and students safe, we must encourage professional development in cultural competence, conflict management, and anti-bullying initiatives.

Above all, America must act on what we know to be true. Our mental health system is broken and underfunded. Between 2009 and 2012, the states slashed mental-health spending by \$4.3 billion – the largest reduction since de-institutionalization in the 1960s and 70s. (Source: [National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors](#))

Now, there's widespread agreement that mental-health services need to be expanded and improved.

To keep our students safe, we've got to act on what the research shows: mental well-being is critical to academic success. We've got to provide visible signs that school is a safe place not just for some, but for all. We've got to spend *more*, not less, to educate and care for the whole child.

On behalf of all school-based mental-health professionals, I thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.