

Comprehensive Strategies To Address School Safety

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Presenters:

- **Shannon Desilets**, Community Wellness Administrator for the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Behavioral Health; Former Governor-appointed Program Director of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement for the State of New Hampshire
- **Dale Erquiaga**, Former Nevada Superintendent of Public Instruction and Chief Strategy Officer for Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval; Former Acting Chancellor of the Nevada System of Higher Education
- **Dr. Sharon Hoover**, Professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine; Co-Director of the National Center for School Mental Health; Director of the National Center for Safe Supportive Schools
- *Moderator:* **Seth Gerson**, Program Director for K-12 Education, National Governors Association

Transcript:

Seth Gerson: Hi, thank you for tuning in today. My name's Seth Gerson, and I'm Program Director for K-12 Education here at the National Governors Association and welcome to NGA's webinar exploring comprehensive strategies for addressing school safety. NGA has supported bipartisan Governors on this issue for many years, and we have approached it as an organization comprehensively from across areas of public safety, mental and behavioral health, and education approach. For education, that means Governors not only looking at physical infrastructure changes but keeping students safe from the inside out with mental health supports, increased school counselors, wraparound supports, ensuring that strengthening overall student well-being and school culture is part of the conversation, and that comprehensive approach is what we want to dig in to today with our panelists. Please note that this is the latest in an ongoing series of [11 other NGA webinars](#), designed to help inform Governor and state strategies for addressing K-12 student needs, all of which are available on the [NGA K-12 Education](#) web page, and include promising practices on chronic absenteeism, afterschool and summer learning and enrichment, parent family and community engagement and cross-agency collaboration.

Today, I'm honored to engage in a conversation with three experts in this area. First, we have Shannon Desilets. Shannon is the Community Wellness Administrator in the Division for Behavioral Health at the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services. Prior to that role, Shannon was the Governor appointed Program Director of the [Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement](#) for the state of New Hampshire. In both roles, Shannon has helped support Governor Sununu's efforts to comprehensively address school safety across the state.

Second, we have Dale Erquiaga. Dale was, until recently, the acting Chancellor for the Nevada System of Higher Education. He's a former Nevada State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Chief Strategy Officer for Governor Brian Sandoval of Nevada and helped lead Governor Sandoval's [Statewide School Safety Task Force](#) in 2018. He also served as National President of Communities In Schools from 2016 to 2020.

And third, Dr. Sharon Hoover is Co-Director of the [National Center for School Mental Health](#) and Director of the [National Center for Safe Supportive Schools](#). Dr. Hoover is also a licensed clinical psychologist and Professor of the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Welcome to all of you.

Dr. Hoover, if we can start with you and we'll dive right into the conversation. Unfortunately, we've continued to see so many of these tragic school shootings, particularly as students have come back to school, post-pandemic. We know the recent tragic school shooting just a few weeks ago in Iowa, at the Perry High School. If you could tell us a little bit, just as a start, about the work of the National Center for School Mental Health and your efforts to help states and districts to comprehensively address school safety, including around positive school climate and comprehensive school mental health. Thanks, Dr. Hoover.

Dr. Sharon Hoover: Sure. Thank you so much for the invitation to join today, Seth, and it's my pleasure to talk about this. It's certainly a matter of concern, both professionally and personally, as a parent of three teens, this is something that's near and dear to my heart. As you mentioned, violence in schools has increased as students have returned post pandemic to school, including, unfortunately, in the form of injury and death by firearms. This is something our National Center for School Mental Health is very concerned about and it's really central to our mission for ensuring that students are safe in school and ready to learn. We've been partnering with states and school districts for over two decades at our National Center to support student mental health in order to really promote their academic and life success. One thing we know from years of literature is that the most effective strategies to promote school safety are really not centered around turning our schools into fortresses with heightened security measures. We know that security measures are critical, but actually, the data really does demonstrate that upstream prevention approaches that focus on things like positive school climate and comprehensive school mental health are more effective at reducing school violence, including firearms violence. Just to break that down a little bit, by positive school climate, we're really referring to evidence-based strategies and interventions that promote positive relationships between everybody in the school building: teacher to teacher, teacher to student, student to student, and creating an environment for everybody - the adults and the students - that is welcoming and inclusive. When those environments exist, students are actually less likely to commit harm against others and themselves. It's important that students feel included and supported and connected in order to promote safety.

Comprehensive school mental health systems, a term that's often used by states and districts are multi-tiered systems of supports, or MTSS sometimes is referred to, and those often reflect partnerships between school systems and then community partners, and it could be departments of health or hospital systems or community behavioral health centers. We usually describe those systems as having three tiers of support, so Tier 1 at the bottom, really reflecting that kind of foundation of a public health approach, and that can be things like mental health literacy in the classroom, restorative practices, teacher well-being efforts, and things that promote the mental health of the entire student body. Tier 2 is kind of that extra layer of support for students who may be experiencing mild to moderate concerns, or who may be more at risk of actually experiencing mental health challenges, maybe because they've been exposed to more adversity, for example. Finally, to round out the multi-tiered systems of support we have Tier 3 which involves more intensive support. These are often provided by school psychologists, school social workers and sometimes by school-based community mental health partners and that's where this partnership really come into play. Our center has been supporting states and school districts to put those comprehensive school mental health systems into place and to assess and improve their school climate in the efforts to promote school safety.

Seth Gerson: Well thanks, Dr. Hoover. That's really helpful to be able to dig down on not only the importance of positive school climate and comprehensive school mental health, but what are we talking about when we're talking about those terms, and the importance of relationships at the heart of everything that happens in schools and between peers and between educators and the spelling out what those different tiers are of support when you're talking about comprehensive school mental health. I really appreciate that explanation.

Turning to a few specific state examples, I want to first turn to Shannon to talk a little bit about New Hampshire's work. Can you tell us about Governor Sununu's efforts over the last multiple years to take a comprehensive approach to addressing school safety, including his [School Safety Preparedness Task Force](#). What was the catalyst for those efforts? What recommendations came out? And how did those discussions evolve over time during the process?

Shannon Desilets: Yes, thank you thank you for having me, and it's an honor to be here with all of you. In having this conversation, and how the Governor addresses it, I think it comes down to prioritization, dedication, courageous leadership and collaboration across various sectors and state departments, and parents and students. Even in preparing to be here with you today, I made sure to have collaborative input from our Chief of Staff, Assistant Chief of our School Readiness Program, Deputy Commissioner of Education, and I think it just goes show the example of everyone working together for the mission of keeping our students and educators safe. I want to extend my thanks to the team as well.

From the start, Governor Sununu said if we can't put our kids on a school bus and truly believe that they're going to be safe then nothing else really matters. Just a little bit of background, before his task force was formed, the School Readiness

Program was established in 2013, under the direction of former Governor Hassan, after the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy. They began conducting school security assessments in 2014. In 2018, Governor Sununu's School Safety Preparedness Task Force was convened, following the tragedy of Marjory Stone Douglas in Parkland, Florida. The task force was comprised of 16 members, who represented stakeholders at state and local level. Whether it be police, fire, first responders, mental health professionals, safety and security professionals, school administration, staff, students, and parents. I believe that's key right there that bringing the representation of everyone's voices to the table. Though there are many important issues that, of course, touch upon the safety of New Hampshire schools and across the nation. The task force was created to consider issues primarily identified with active shooter incidents. The overarching goals of the task force was one to provide practical, actionable recommendations from areas of agreement among the task force members to New Hampshire's state and local leaders, school admin, staff, students, parents, first responders, to make New Hampshire some of the safest schools in the nation, two, while complementing and furthering the primary mission of New Hampshire schools by fostering an atmosphere that is conducive to the educational, emotional, and physical well-being of growth of staff and students.

The task force was charged with consulting with subject matter experts and members of the public to find agreed upon steps that move the state forward, improving the safety of New Hampshire students while maintaining improving the core purpose of those educational institutions. They consulted with four working groups made up of over a hundred subject matter experts focused in the areas of emergency response, mental health, innovation and technology, and education, as well as speaking and meeting with our school resource officers at our 2018 SRO Conference.

So, they were given 90 days to evaluate and recommend agreed upon actual steps for New Hampshire to take, and as a result of all the steps taken, the task force presented recommendations organized into seven topic areas and those being: legislative, mental health, planning, training, exercise, communications, facilities, totaling 59 recommendations to aid and prioritizing school safety preparedness initiatives. They spent over a thousand hours diving and researching, discussing the most pressing issues involving school safety and security and including conducting a comprehensive review of state, local, federal, private research, and after-action reports speaking with the public visiting schools, speaking with the admin, the staff, students, and parents, meeting with our local fire, police, first responders, and of course, reviewing pertinent law and regulations. That's how the 59 recommendations came to be.

And then from that, came our schoolsafetyresources@nh.gov site where all of this is provided so everybody can access and see that. You asked about involvement, I think, through the process, involvement actually naturally happened. Through consultation with experts, for example, or the countless hours poured into research and interviews, it became a living exploration to find the

best out there, and ultimately crafted into what was published in July, 2018. With that said, it's never complete, right? It's constantly ongoing and evolving.

One example of that evolution that happened through this was creating my position, actually. My background is providing post trauma therapy in Newtown, Sandy Hook. That led me to come to Scarlett Lewis, who lost her son Jesse inside his first-grade classroom. What she's created, through collaboration with experts in the field of education, counseling, psychology, the list goes on, is known as the [Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement](#), character, social, emotional development. We met with the Governor, then he invited her, then Director of Homeland Security, and lead of the task force, Perry Plumber, who you know Seth, to hear her. Perry, he's funny, sharing his story, he's like we got 90 days, I got to get this done. My boss wants me to go here and talk about love. But, what he heard, ten minutes in, his jaw is on the floor, and he goes, look! We have poured over a thousand hours into this report, and there was a big hole missing that we didn't even necessarily know was missing. This is it. This comes to that proactive preventive piece, disrupting that pathway to violence before grievance happens, or, if one does happen, providing the skills and tools to work through conflict and adversities.

The Governor hired me as Program Director of the Choose Love Movement back in 2018, working directly out of his office to support and serve our state. Five of the best years of my career, honestly, and because he's not running again as Governor, we have since moved my position over to HHS, Division for Behavioral Health, because so much has been accomplished, and we want to be able to sustain the support for the state. I don't just work with schools. I work with homes and communities. I have a mayor wanting to become the first Choose Love city in the nation. I work with the Department of Safety, and I do workshops for employees to help with burnout and self-care. I work closely, of course, with DHHS, I'm part of it now, DCYF, we became the first to launch Choose Love for Caregivers, and I even work with Department of Corrections. We became the first to launch Choose Love for Corrections. Why am I sharing all that? Well, that obviously ties in with the well-being of our schools. How many incarcerated people have children? Or how many youth maybe are in care and have those ACEs high up on that scale, right? So, bringing this in, it really does take a community to support a school community. I think that evolution and really just working together collaboratively, has been a great success.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Shannon, you really gave us some really good insights into how that task force has evolved over time, how it came to be, and what the work has been, and how it continues. I really appreciate your insights on that. I think you really also spoke to the cross-agency collaboration piece of this and that continues. It's discussions between emergency management and public safety and education, and mental health. All that were at the table, including parents and families, so large stakeholders for their group. It is just so critical. I didn't know the part about Governor Hassan, and the continuation then to Governor Sununu which is also just so interesting to think about. This is a bipartisan issue, and it can carry forward and build upon different administrations.

Dale, I want to turn to you, some similar questions because I know you also led a task force and were part of these issues for many years. Just tell us about your experience in Nevada, helping Governor Sandoval address school safety including as part of that task force. What was the catalyst? How did you seek to address those issues from the multiple lenses we've been talking about?

Dale Erquiaga: Sure. Thank you, Seth. Thanks for having me here. Thanks for the questions. For context, Brian Sandoval was the Governor of Nevada, from 2011 to 2019, and I served in his office as Chief Strategy Officer. I was also his Superintendent of Public Instruction, which leads our PreK-12 system here. In 2015, Nevada had experienced two things really: a series of suicides in middle schools across the state - multiple suicides - and a school shooting. A little boy brought a gun to a middle school and killed a teacher and himself. The Governor's response in that first session was sort of twofold, because of the suicide work, then the work that the districts had learned we created the Office of Safe and Respectful Learning so not unlike the New Hampshire experience. We created an office within the Department of Education to oversee a new Comprehensive School Safety and Anti-Bullying statute. But the Governor also saw the need for added supports, what we've been talking about here a lot, an MTSS approach. At the time I think I had 600,000 students when I was the Superintendent, and we had, I believe, 22 school social workers in the entire state. Two in the second largest district, and the other 20 in the largest district, which has nearly 400,000 students. We funded some school social worker positions and a school climate assessment survey, so that we could allocate the money to those schools most in need.

That was really the first approach, trying to deepen state coordination of systems of support. Thanks to a State Senator, the late Debbie Smith, we also brought a "safe to tell," or it's also called [Safe Voice](#) in Nevada now, the program came from Colorado. It's sort of an ability for students to sort of self-identify and self-report when they know something's going on at school. That's where we started, and then in 2018 the Parkland shooting motivated the Governor to do more in the last year of his term, and I was by that time the President of Communities In Schools which, for those who do not have Communities In Schools in your state, is essentially a multi-tiered system of supports. It started out as a dropout prevention program and is today much more. I came back from that job to chair his task force, and it really closely aligns with the work that Shannon described in New Hampshire. I think there were 26 of us. There was a multi-party group: law enforcement, teachers, students. That proved to me the most important group.

Our recommendations pretty much align with what you heard from the two previous speakers. Lots of conversation, about school training, about the physicality of the buildings and school resource officers or school police. Nevada has no money for those things. We are at the bottom five always of school funding. There was conversation about the needs for funding earmarked for those things, so it doesn't get wrapped up in the normal district budget process. But there was a heavy emphasis on social -emotional learning and providing

more social workers or more trained professionals, either through community or staff to provide that prevention that you hear so much about.

I think for me, the takeaway here is, say listen to the two speakers, and what I went through, it is that stackable approach of prevention as well as, I hate this term but here it is, the hardening of schools and the training of folks. It does have to include some of that, there's call for that. But it was for us, having lots of players at the table, and that broad approach, the comprehensive, to use your word or the cross sectional, cross jurisdictional approach, that I think, ultimately put together some really good plans. These plans tend to be static, right? We respond, we are political creatures, and so we respond when there is a horrible incident, and then they sit and we don't look at them, and then we respond to the next horrible incident. That's what I found in Nevada. Nevada had created school safety plans after the Columbine shooting. Those statutes hadn't been changed since Columbine. I don't even think they were amended after Sandy Hook. So, we said, okay, this needs to be freshened up, and that would be my advice. These things have to be looked at much more often. But we took the same approach, I think very cross jurisdictional, and tried to cover the full spectrum, and not just respond with a conversation about metal detectors and guns, which is where some people wanted us to go and where other people feared we would go.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Dale, really helpful. I think you're right about the cross jurisdictional approach you really spoke to that. I think one of the things that's been interesting going from Shannon to you is that this evolution of not only a task force and then identifying recommendations, but then creating also the infrastructure within an office, whether it's at education or mental health or behavioral health at HHS. These different agencies make sure the work is continuing, that is embedded in the everyday work of the different agencies so it carries forward.

One other thing I want to mention at this point is just that, when you've heard about these task forces, you've heard the different terms that have been introduced. We will make sure, listeners and viewers, that we're going to have a number of these resources attached to the webinar. As you hear about these task forces, and you hear about this work that's ongoing, you can look and then dig in a little deeper into the work that's been happening.

Dr. Hoover, I want to move back to you and zoom back out a little bit. You mentioned the school climate. You've mentioned some of the MTSS work. How would you recommend Governors and states think about this cross work, how it can happen well? Where would you kind of start with it? If you're in a state that's looking a little more at strengthening your work in this area, thinking about, especially in light of some of the federal funding that's come in over the last couple of years, over 2 billion dollars, I believe, just for education and mental health as part of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, just how would you recommend Governors and states think about that work?

Dr. Sharon Hoover: Yeah, thanks for that. We know that many states are currently looking at and fearful of the impending funding cliff of COVID relief funding. It really does necessitate this examination of how we wisely invest in our school mental health efforts or school climate efforts, and school safety efforts to achieve the greatest positive impact that we can and have some sustainable gains here. Our National Center has been working with many states and local communities to capitalize on opportunities that are coming from the COVID relief funds and other state investments so that they can sustain effective school mental health and kind of get the best return on their investment. You mentioned the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act as part of that COVID relief response. It's also known as BSCA. Sometimes you may hear me say, BSCA. That specific act appropriated billions of dollars, as you said, to several grant programs offered by the US Department of Education and the US Department of Health and Human Services. One piece of advice and I think most are aware of, but just be sure that your states are aware of the grant opportunities that are coming out of the BSCA funding and take advantage of those grant opportunities that still exist.

This includes substance abuse mental health services administration, [SAMHSA's Trauma-Informed Services and Schools grants](#), the [Project AWARE grants](#) which are the Project Advancing Wellness and Resiliency and Education Grants, and the Department of Education has the [School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program](#) and the [Mental Health Service Professionals Demonstration Grant Program](#). Those have been really instrumental in advancing some of this work. The Department of Ed also has a Stronger Connections Program which allocated about a billion dollars to 56 states and territories to help the most high need districts and schools to create safe and supportive learning opportunities. There was a lot of flexibility within those funds for states to support local districts to do this work.

States have also leveraged BSCA funds to support school mental health via their block grant allocations and also funding geared toward a crisis response and the expansion of certified community behavioral health clinics. These are opportunities, if your state's not yet taking advantage of, to consider as one way of promoting school behavioral health. Then, finally, a lot of states and LEAs are really taking this opportunity to better leverage Medicaid and CHIP funding, the Children's Health Insurance Program funding for school mental health services. The BSCA required and produced updated guidance on billing and delivery of student services that are covered by Medicaid and CHIP in schools. They establish a [technical assistance center](#) to support state and local education authorities in leveraging Medicaid. There's a competitive process actually about to be released to award \$50 million dollars for states to expand their Medicaid and CHIP funded school mental health services. That's kind of the array of things that are happening under this funding.

I'll share just three key strategies we've been supporting states with, and then a couple of key resources. The first three strategies that we often work on with states are first taking a look at strengthening and expanding their Medicaid

coverage of comprehensive school mental health systems so they can increase coverage for early intervention and treatment services in schools. They can use the funding to support technology and training and startup costs for their local education agencies. A few examples of things states are looking at are establishing a statewide platform to support school Medicaid programs. They're looking at a comprehensive approach to training and equipping individuals and systems involved. If you've looked at the guidance for Medicaid, it is very dense and has hundreds of pages. So, you need to really equip folks within your state and local communities to be ready to actually implement the guidance. The training would cover intricacies of Medicaid regulations, data management, privacy and security compliance and a whole lot more. But funding under this mechanism can also be used to establish school-based health centers to support communities in schools, to support tele-behavioral health. There's a lot of opportunities around this expansion of Medicaid.

The second strategy is really to enhance your data systems. A lot of school behavioral health efforts are slowed down, if not halted, by poor data infrastructure. States have been looking to use these funds, not just to hire people that they then might have to de-hire, lay off down the road because of the funding cliff, but really to build infrastructure through data development. This can include surveillance data to look at the mental health needs and strengths of your student population, but also to collect real time data as students are engaging in mental health supports, for example. And having data systems that actually cross communicate between education and behavioral health and health systems is really critical.

The third strategy that we've seen a number of states using these funds for building sustainability is creating state technical assistance centers and professional development support centers for school mental health system implementation. For example, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, Connecticut, South Carolina. Those are four states that have used some of these funds to actually establish school mental health technical assistance centers to provide support for their LEAs as they're implementing best practices. A couple quick resources that we're often sharing with states first, and they're both freely available online. One is the [School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation System](#). It's a free platform for states, districts, and school teams to go in and assess their quality of school mental health systems relative to national performance standards. Then there's a bunch of, a wealth of resources on there, as well as screening and assessment libraries, state policy map. Then the second resource, it was put out by the Hopeful Futures Campaign, it's a national group of organizations that represent education and behavioral health. They put out a [legislative guide](#) that has been really helpful to check out what is happening in your own state, but also to have examples of legislative wins in school mental health, just to take a look at policies for things like well-being checks in schools, mental health literacy in the curriculum, life skills for students, school Medicaid expansion, increasing your pipeline for mental health professionals in schools, and that resource as well as the [National Report Card for school mental health](#) can be found at hopefutures.us.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Dr. Hoover. Lots of great information there, and we'll definitely include those resources attached to this webinar and appreciate you laying out those three strategies in particular that can be actionable, school based mental health, comprehensive school mental health, and some of the training that goes along with that to make sure that you're accessing those funds particularly well, not just saying, here's some opportunities to do so, but districts having the ability to actually draw down those funds and use them, use them effectively. The data systems tracking mental health needs, then you mentioned the state TA centers, that's the work that's happening in Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, and South Carolina. Really appreciate the specificity of some of those strategies. Some of the states are doing that great work.

Shannon, I want to turn back to you. You had mentioned around the cross section of stakeholders that were involved in the effort around the task force. If you could just talk about how, even after the task force, you were able to, and the Governor and the task force members, Perry, yourself, talk to parents and families and communities about this work, and the importance of it. How you've kept that going, where have you seen impact across the state, and how the work continues?

Shannon Desilets: Absolutely. Having everybody at the table in various state departments, whether it be the Department of Safety, Department of Ed, HHS, mental health professionals, school admin. It was just so vital to bring all those voices together. I referred earlier to the school resource center available to keep everybody up to date. Also, grassroots efforts, with my position I'm going out there and presenting at parent community nights in schools. That's another avenue to share about the school resource center and everybody really working and coming together. The report and recommendations are really meant to empower school staff and students by creating that culture that we've been talking about a lot that promotes that mental health and well-being. And prepared to respond, god forbid, if someone chose to commit an act of violence. Preparedness is power, we're talking about both ends of the pathway to violence prevention. Then an attack does happen, what can be done? With my experience in Newtown, Sandy Hook, leaning into experts there, the lead investigator in Sandy Hook, our state has definitely leaned into the lead investigator of Parkland. If we're not using those opportunities to learn, we're missing our big thing, right? Just bringing everybody together having those conversations, our task force continues to meet, like this wasn't a report is done, and we're done. We meet at least quarterly, more if needed. Things have evolved, and every recommendation is ongoing, as I said earlier. We also have some initiatives, four more initiatives, and I think will become additional recommendations. Because we really looked at this and saw potential gaps, right? And one of them being, it's working closely with Chief Dean from University of New Hampshire. He so eloquently refers to our incoming freshmen as thirteenth graders, because they're struggling. They're not ready whether it's coming from New Hampshire or other states. If he's responding to five suicidal ideations a week, we have a

problem here, and we need to address and help our youth across the board. So, grassroots efforts, people working from their hearts to really bring change and working together and seeing where there are gaps, and how can we improve?

I think you asked about challenges or barriers, like New Hampshire, like many, many other states, were a local control state, right? So the nature in how things run, there's beauty in that local control and might also become barriers or something we need to navigate too right, especially in a situation where we might be seeking a statewide implementation. Whether that be, for instance, notification system. Maybe it wouldn't have worked well in a remote town, versus the city, or other possible challenges or things that came up. As with everything, there's understaffing, there's staff turnover, funding priority. Sometimes you need to chase down information, or with our staff turnover, that could cause some stalls and not trickling information down to where it needs to go. But this is very much something we are constantly working with and through, and it's the nature of how things run. The school too, I don't know if I said this earlier, but when getting out there and reaching everyone who is out there, we mailed hard copies of the school safety report to every superintendent with extra copies to get to the principals as well. Then, of course, everything's available online. It is ongoing. Things are very much never done, and we have to view them that way. We can't be idle. Things are always evolving. Systems might be available that are advanced or improved and let's look into that, so very much ongoing.

Some of the progression, there's 59 recommendations. I won't share all of the progressions with you, but just to share a few. Looking at one recommendation, for instance, school assessment process and providing reassessments at least every 3 years or when significant changes to faculty, staff, or policy occur. I believe our school readiness program out of our Homeland Security Emergency Management office, they've conducted over 1,200 physical school security assessments since 2014. Every public school in New Hampshire has been assessed at least once.

Some other modes of progression, just with the emergency operation plans, getting those sent over. I think, prior to all this, those EOP plans were sent to Department of Ed, and they weren't getting to Homeland. So, improvements made there. Our emergency management team conducts the school readiness program, just such fantastic exercises and trainings available. Of course, I've said it again, schoolsafetyresources.nh.gov. That was actually a recommendation to have a centralized space for people, to be able to access and work through. I shared about the initiatives that we are in addition to the recommendations working on and diving in. That just goes to show the reality of things. This doesn't stop, right?

We also have another initiative working with behavioral threat assessment core team, developing one of those to get in there and really be able to bring this to the school. Staff members have achieved master training certification from the national threat evaluation reporting office since September of 2022. They are working towards that. The impact from all of this that we're seeing at school and

district levels is we do have to talk about that hardening right and adding the layers of security, camera surveillance, locks, security vestibules, all that is important - second save lives, right? So, creating those barriers. But in addition to that, obviously bringing in what the Governor brought me in for is bringing the social-emotional learning, character, social emotional development to help with that school culture. Some of the biggest feedback I've received from educators is I didn't realize how much I would also gain from this, right? It's helping across the board. Then, of course, Dr. Hoover, who referred to some great grants that are out there, and that is something also that our state right away got on, whether it be the public-school infrastructure fund or the ARPA funds or the Safe Grant Funds. They've definitely taken full advantage of this, and a lot of money has gone up to our schools.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Shannon, really helpful. I think you really speak, too, that it's a continuing conversation. The task force continues to meet, going out and doing those parent and community nights. That you're continuing to do outreach and keep it on the radar and lens of parents and families and communities. It also made me think about the bully pulpit piece of this that a Governor has. I remember a few years ago, I hope I'm right on this, but I remember Governor Sununu bringing Scarlett Lewis to the State of the State I think it was, or the inaugural speech, and the kind of signal that must have sent to the districts across the state that as an invited guest to stand side by side with him and saying, this is an important aspect to me, I'm sure spoke volumes to the rest of the state and the district superintendents. And Perry himself as being of a public safety background and being able to speak from that standpoint of saying, this is important from a preventive side. Those sorts of bully pulpit moments that make so much of the difference.

One other thing you mentioned is how you're continuing to take from K-12, now reaching into University of New Hampshire and following those students in and Dale, I want to turn to you because I know you have experience as part of the Nevada System of Higher Education. How have you seen the sort of work from the task force that you were heading live on and in your role as Chancellor there for a year or two? How has that informed your experience there and how have you seen the work advance in Nevada?

Dale Erquiaga: Shortly after I was named Chancellor there was a shooting at a university, I think it was the University of Virginia. I recall saying to my cabinet and my college and university presidents, this is a matter of time before this happens here. I had seen a school shooting as a superintendent. The Chancellor doesn't have a lot of power. It's an administrative role. What I chose to do was actually use some SAMHSA money. I did a mental health survey. As I talked to both my faculty and students, yeah, the issues are exactly the same. But the issues that students had in high school, they just bring with them when they move into the dorm. They talked a lot about their mental health, and my faculty talked about it. Not having a budget and not having a great deal of authority, I use this close to the bully pulpit as somebody who's a bureaucrat like a Chancellor has, and at every board of regents meeting I talked about my own

mental health issues. I suffer from depression. I have generalized anxiety disorder and have panic attacks. People would come up to me after those meetings and say just thanks for saying that, I've never seen a public official do that. That's my first recommendation, is normalize these conversations, otherwise the politics wins. Whether it's conversation about mental health or it's conversations about guns, normalize it. It has to be okay to talk about, and that is something that a Governor could do.

As you probably know from the news, unfortunately, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas had a shooting in December. An adult, somebody who was a failed job applicant, brought a gun to school and killed some faculty. The police have now reported there was no motive found, no manifesto, no note, so we don't know why. But they have responded, fortunately the president of that university is a psychologist by training, and they really have embraced their community to try to move through the mental health challenges. Conversely, when I got my SAMHSA survey, the data released, it said there was a number of folks who have suicide ideation or challenges. One of my presidents said, well, that's not what my staff tells me. Okay, get different staff would be my first recommendation. My second would be sort of my other recommendation for folks who are in this work: proximity really matters. I learn this frankly, more as the President of Communities In Schools even than as a Superintendent or Chancellor, but you have to talk to students, and you have to talk to all kinds of students. Don't just talk to student government leaders. I was a student government leader. We're not normal. We're not like the mass group of students who are in your schools, right? They already have more access, more agency, frankly, more power. What I found beneficial at the School Safety Task Force, and as Chancellor, is to talk to students in sort of the rank and file. That's something that I would also say is, if you sit in a Governor's office, get out of that office. Go and talk to the folks who are in these schools. See what they're actually feeling and what they need. I had that really strange experience at our school task force. Las Vegas had a shooting, but not at a school. The nation's largest mass casualty event, October 1, and I had a student who was there, come to talk to me in this meeting. He said, look, I want my teachers armed. I want guns. I had another student whose family was there, say, I never want to be near a gun again. This very process of do we, don't we?

And I had another young student who publicly talked about our mental health issues, say you and all of your safety drills drive my anxiety through the roof because I have to do an active shooting drill. Even the ways in which we respond have impacts. Again, I think this is a comprehensive approach. Lots of agencies involved and calls for leadership from the Governor's office, some of the minor successes I had, whether it was the ultimate use of Medicaid or, Shannon we had the same thing. Our plans went to me as Superintendent, and not to Homeland Security. Because I knew those two Cabinet officers, we fixed that. Things like a Children's Cabinet or a group who can talk about these issues broadly. These are not K 12 issues. They are not even Pre-K through PhD issues. They are community issues.

And really, that's where I'll speak like a politician now because I have had as many political jobs as I have bureaucratic jobs. When you sit in the Governor's office, that is the agency you have, that is the pulpit you have. Find a way for you and your Governor to have a point of view about these things. I don't really care what your point of view is on some of these hot button issues but have it and understand that it is an ecosystem, that you can drive conversations and relationships among leaders. That can advance this work and sustain this work as my much more eloquent and much more highly skilled colleagues have already said. That's where the rubber meets the road here is, we're not going to solve this in a one off. We will solve it through a sort of comprehensive planning and relationships that sustain the work and allow us to be adaptive.

It isn't a school problem. It's a community issue. Again, I think it's okay to talk about that. I happen to think mental health is at the root of a lot of it, and so I will talk about it. It's the little thing I can do, so I think we all have some little thing. When you sit in the Governor's office, you have some big levers you can pull so I would say, use both.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Dale. I really appreciate that advice. The guidance given your different roles over time. You've seen those different perspectives, and particularly as Chancellor in seeing how that carries through those conversations even in the higher ed context, as those students graduate from K-12. I do want to mention here that some of the terms sometimes get held up, but what we found is a lot of agreement around the importance of mental health and well-being. Some if you talk about the skills in particular problem solving, adaptability, communication, collaboration, much more agreement across the board, and step out of some of those terms, then you'll have a lot more interest. We saw this a lot last year. I know, Dr. Hoover is involved in this work with Governor Murphy's initiative last year on [Youth Mental Health](#), the Chairs Initiative from NGA, a lot of bipartisan support. It was Governor Cox, our now Chair, who stood up at the winter meeting with 45 other Governors, talked about his personal experience of having some suicidal ideation, having trouble as a youth, and saying to the crowd as lived experience that he made it through. He made it through with relationships with peers, relationships with educators. I think that made a big difference in the room and the C-span cameras. Again, another bully pulpit moment that I think has carried through. But think kind of across the board, bipartisan interest in it, but some of the terms can be used differently, depending on the state.

Sharon, I want to turn back to you on a question we typically get. Dale alluded to this, which was very helpful. When you're talking about some of the drills and the anxiety it can cause, having some of these school safety conversations with students and with parents and educators, what would be your recommendations for guidance on how to have those conversations? How to have those conversations across ages that can still reduce anxiety, not create anxiety when you're having them?

Dr. Sharon Hoover: Good question. I appreciate it, Dale, setting that up unintentionally. But the idea that maybe we're actually causing anxiety and doing harm and it's really important for school systems to ensure that their efforts to protect our students and our children from rare danger situations are not actually causing unintended harm and anxiety, and there are many promising practices really to ensure that those school safety conversations don't cause increased anxiety or limit anxiety. Just a few suggestions. The first area is really about effective communication. From day one every school year, we need to be communicating that our school is a safety zone, and that can be hard to do when we're hearing about and seeing, witnessing and very rarely experiencing firsthand some of these dangerous violent situations.

But in general schools are a safe place to be, and we're all responsible for ensuring safety. We want to communicate that and the best way to stay safe at school is to have trusting relationships, and for every adult and student to feel that they belong. We want to communicate with our students and our adults in the building how to be kind, to promote inclusion, how to reach out if you're worried, so communication is key. Then certainly communication when it comes to preparing for and experiencing actual emergencies or dangerous situations, you want to ensure that you're providing clear, accurate information to everybody involved, including families and the broader community and address concerns and dispel rumors. This includes, of course, having a very well-defined communication plan, not just what do you do in the building, but how do you communicate with those in the building and outside of the building that clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities for communicating with staff and parents and families and the media during emergencies. Most school systems have this in place, but as Dale alluded to earlier, sometimes things go into a file drawer until there's another incident. We just want to review these regularly. You want to tailor communications to be age-appropriate, right, for different grade levels and avoid unnecessary details that may be overwhelming to young students. Don't underappreciate what also might be overwhelming to older students. Ensure that students and staff do have access to supports, including counselors, if their anxiety is raised by some of these communications.

The second area is drills and training, and again Dale alluded to this earlier. It is okay and important to have regular safety drills in school, so that students and staff are familiar with emergency procedures. But it's unnecessary and even potentially harmful, to use scare tactics or engage in unnecessary gore or behaviors that are intended to induce fear during those drills, right? We really recommend limiting exposure to sensationalized or graphic content during drills and training and talking about safety incidents. We recommend using language that emphasizes that the adults in the school are working hard to keep them safe. You can use concrete examples of common dangers that adults address like a stray dog on campus or knowing if it's a good dog or a sick dog, and we're talking with younger children and using words around safety when we're talking about drills, like this is a safety drill instead of this is an active shooter drill. Again, just being really mindful of the language and examples that we're using. We know that training can build confidence and reduce anxiety by making those safety routines kind of part of the regular routine, but there are ways of doing it

that can reduce anxiety. It can be really helpful to have students involved in the development of safety, planning and procedures so to empower them to contribute ideas. I love how both of our guests really talked about student and family involvement.

Just to kind of speak to the idea of how do you attune these communications and supports and training and drills to students who may have unique needs or mental health challenges or developmental challenges, it's important to think about the extra support that those students might need. Just for an example, anxious students may need more advanced notice of drills, and an opportunity to partner with a teacher, with a counselor, with a peer, during training or drills. Students with autism or other developmental delays may benefit from having more advanced notice, engaging in what we call social stories, which is kind of like a storybook process that helps outline what's going to happen during a training or a drill or an actual emergency, and they may need some accommodations to help reduce anxiety, like noisy or overstimulating sounds or activities like knocking on doors or alarms that may happen. Just some things to keep in mind as you're actually doing these activities in schools. There's a way that we can reduce anxiety across the board.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Dr. Hoover. Really helpful. Effective communication, concrete plans, training and really being careful about the language that's being used. That's a great point. Then thinking about how you tailor support to students with unique needs, in particular, attending to that.

For the last minute or two, I just want to do a round robin and go back to Shannon and then Dale and Dr. Hoover. What will be your final advice to Governors and states? Given your different roles, given your experiences, what would you most want to impart to Governors and states?

Shannon Desilets: I think we've talked a lot about that collaboration, and that courageous leadership thinking outside the box. I just really want to thank Dale for sharing your story and humanizing the conversations that are needed, right? Then also we touched upon raising the voices of our youth. That is vital. We must listen to them. I have youth from all over the country reaching out to me. I work with our Choose Love youth ambassadors nationally reaching out to me, wanting to bring it into their schools and their schools might be fighting it. They want to start Choose Love club or whatnot. Also, preparedness is power. We've always taken the stance here in New Hampshire. It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when. The thought process of it would never happen here is, it scares me, it is a big mistake, and I have heard it. No one would have expected it in Sandy Hook. I'll tell you that. I can attest to the magnitude of the aftermath of the impact even 11 years later. It has to be a priority.

I want to thank Dr. Hoover and Dale too. Really, the conversations around mental health and well-being and the importance of that. I think in the Governor's office we need to be looking at that. I know I don't want to take too much time here, but also Scarlett Lewis, the mother Jesse, who lost her son, she's had the courage.

She's gone there. She's interviewed school shooters or would-have-been school shooters. There's power in that to learn from them like where were they? Where was their mind? What could we have done differently? How can we learn from this? There was one would-have-been school shooter who said he had it all planned out. He brought a gun to school. He had his plan, but it was one act of kindness from another student inviting him to watch a movie that changed the entire thing. That connection, people need connection.

I think it is also one of the challenges of maybe we don't have time. Whether it's bringing on a social-emotional program or something, you don't have the time to deal with the aftermath of a school tragedy. I can personally attest to that, and the tears I've wiped in Sandy Hook, the stories I know that I can't share that fuels me here to do everything in my power. What if we all know red tape and bureaucracy is alive and well, but what if we simply view the topic of school safety approaching it, conducting ourselves with the utmost integrity. The single goal in mind of fostering the educational, emotional, physical well-being of students and educational staff, leaving all the other noise at the door. Our kids deserve that.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Shannon. Dale.

Dale Erquiaga: Plus one to everything Shannon just said, and then I'll just give one last piece of advice and not repeat myself. Involve your higher education institutions. They control the pipeline of all the workers you want, whether it's a social worker or a future police officer. They are certified through higher education training. Involve higher ed. It's a mistake I made in my career. I sort of ignored them. They lived in a different silo than I did most of my career, and then I ended up running them and thought, oh, good heavens! There are all these resources up here that I could have used, so involve higher ed, they have research programs, like Dr. Hoover's exist in other places, not as great, but there are medical schools, and even other social sciences who have research for you. As you're bringing everyone to the table in your children's cabinet or your conversation to have a point of view about this issue, don't forget the higher ed people. They don't report to most Governors in our states but invite them. They control a lot of resources, and they are having the same, same issues on their campuses.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Dale. Dr. Hoover.

Dr. Sharon Hoover: Sure, I would just say that when it comes to school safety, really, the most important thing that we can do is to promote a positive school culture. This, from a Governor's perspective, really just asking you to support your education leaders as they work to foster mental health of their students and staff, and to foster a positive and inclusive school culture that supports empathy and a sense of belonging. It can be really natural and easy to react in the face of danger. That's what we do. That's what our minds and bodies do as individuals and as communities. We often react with measures that make us feel physically secure, and really don't attune to some of the things that may

actually prevent violence and promote healthy communities. When we have the parents of children who've lost their children to gun violence in schools, telling us to focus on creating kind schools, promoting connection and inclusion. We should listen to them. The data supports those sentiments as well. We need to be looking at school culture and promoting mental health in our schools.

Seth Gerson: Thank you so much. A positive school culture, involving higher education, and all coming back to relationships and connections. Making sure you have those connections with peers and educators. School is that environment for being able to thrive. Thank you all for such a great conversation today, Shannon, Dale, Dr. Hoover, and sharing your expertise and insights on a tough but important conversation and really appreciate you guys taking that time today. Viewers, please note that all reports and resources discussed during the webinar will be attached to the recording once it's posted to the [NGA website](#). Thank you all again, and until next time, thanks for tuning in and have a great day.