

Dr. Akil Ross
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Opening Remarks
Forum on School Safety

No Written Word,
Nor Spoken Plea,
Can Teach our Youth,
Who they should be,

Nor all the Books,
On all the Shelves,

It's who the People are, themselves

Leader Pelosi, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the honor of addressing you today. My name is Dr. Akil Ross, and I am in my 8th year as principal of Chapin High School in Chapin, South Carolina. I like to cite that poem from the great coach John Wooden as a reminder that our students learn from the actions of the adults.

Each day our actions become lessons. As an instructional leader, there are two types of decisions I can make. Situational decisions that solve today's problems or sustainable decisions that solves tomorrow's problems. Every study on school safety makes the same recommendations. I would like to share why we have to follow these recommendations.

As principal, I am trusted to make the best decisions for my 1400 students. Their parents and our community have trust in me to keep students physically and emotionally healthy. We take a whole child approach in my community by meeting the needs of students' mind, body and spirit. A culture in which each student feels known, and valued, and connected. With the support of this amazing community and with the tireless, committed efforts of my teachers and leadership team, I was honored to be selected this past October as the 2018 National Principal of the Year by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Creating such a school climate is my primary responsibility as a principal. As a result, we deal with the wide spectrum of safety issues from bullying, fighting, substance abuse, suicide, and school shootings.

To maintain a safety and a healthy school campus, we must have a strong continuum of care for the students which includes Prevention, Intervention, and Recovery. To begin, I want to share a concern that the current national conversation about school safety is far too narrow. All of the discussion is focused on the interventions. School safety is about so much more than just the absence of violence.

It's about preventing problems from festering, before the need to intervene when disturbing behavior becomes violent behavior.

The Navy understands the power of Prevention. My father served on an Aircraft Carrier in Vietnam. He told me stories about how the Carrier is the most valuable ship. It has the fewest defenses in the fleet. Because the Navy values prevention, they surround the Carrier with ships, planes and submarines that make attacks virtually impossible.

Surrounding every school in our nation, there should be a fleet of preventions.

Including:

- Training school faculty and staff to identify the signs of threats and referring students for help
- Partnerships with law enforcement for school threat assessments, 590 schools in my state do not have SROs
- Access to mental health professionals at each school. I share a social worker with 4 schools and I am one of the lucky ones.
- Reporting systems that lead to long term treatment for mental health and family counseling

If we do not place the funding emphasis on providing schools with these resources, then we will be forced to spend more money on interventions and recovery.

I would like to conclude with a story about the power of prevention. I cannot use the name of the student in order to protect them. However, a school counselor back home saw a student whose behavior had changed. She said to the student I need to speak with you tomorrow. On the next day, the counselor met with the student who admitted that they were going to harm themselves but the promise of meeting with someone saved him from killing himself.

The counselor contacted the parent who was in total disbelief. It was after the counselor shared the details that Mom found a journal and a gun in the basement.

I always think about what would have happened if the school counselor did not see those signs.

Prevention works and we must invest in it.

What I suggest is that we get serious about the prevention part of the continuum of care. If schools had the wraparound services and the capacity to identify student difficulties early, we could provide essential supports and build students' resiliency to manage them. If we don't invest in prevention and preventive personnel, we're going to keep spending money on the interventions with the same tragic results we are seeing far too often.

I thank the committee again for allowing me to address this crucial topic. And I look forward to your questions