

Testimony for the House Education & Workforce Committee

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Good afternoon. My name is Joaquin Tamayo, and I am honored to have been asked by this committee to offer my testimony as a lifelong educator on how to create safe, supportive, and high-performing school environments that enable all of our children, no matter who they are or where they are from, to achieve their potential and become active and engaged citizens of the United States. In the wake of last month's tragic shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, I believe it is absolutely essential that we inform with evidence and data, as well as with experience-informed perspective, the national conversation about how to keep our kids safe and well-educated in school, and I applaud the committee for convening this forum today and offer my gratitude for your consideration today.

I wept when I watched in real time as the school shooting unfolded in Parkland. As a former high school teacher and principal, I empathize profoundly with the horror experienced by the Stoneman Douglas community, and I am resolved, as I know all of you are, to do whatever it takes to make our schools the safest places they can be for all of our students and educators. Following tragedies like those that occurred in Parkland and Newtown, it is right to explore all the ways in which we can make our schools even safer, more effective places for children to learn. Indeed, I believe it is incumbent upon leaders and concerned citizens everywhere, including Congress, to leverage the urgency that followed last month's shooting in order to advance what we know works not only to secure our school buildings but also to ensure that our schools are places where students are supported to become well-adjusted, productive members of society.

So, what do we know about some fundamental actions that work to make schools safer?

First, we must hold every principal, school superintendent, and state education chief accountable for ensuring the regular upkeep of critical infrastructure in our school buildings that are designed to help keep people safe—like doors that can be secured from the inside in the event of an intruder in school, as recommended by the National Association of State Fire Marshals in partnership with the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission. In addition to infrastructure, every school also needs a security plan, a staff well-trained in emergency response, and a responsive central office with the capacity to quickly act on any safety issues brought to its attention. These are basic elements of school safety that can be acted upon and improved immediately, and there are effective resources that schools, districts, and states can use to do this, like the US Department of Education's Readiness and Emergency Management

for Schools Technical Assistance Center. Congress can help by funding the maintenance of our schools' physical plants and training educators in emergency response to reduce the likelihood of an active shooter event in the future.

And second, as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act, we must continue to work to establish in every school the conditions for student learning that engage students, ensure daily attendance, promote high achievement, and support students' physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. In addition to reliable infrastructure, students are safest and learn best when they attend schools with strong school and classroom climates where they are both challenged and accepted. In fact, we know from experience and rigorous research in education that when students attend schools with strong climates, "students are more likely to engage in the curriculum, achieve academically, and develop positive relationships; [and] are less likely to exhibit problem behaviors" (US Dept. of Education, 2016). I believe Congress can further support schools by continuing to fund critical resources that lead to school climate improvements, like the US Department of Education's National Center for Safe, Supportive Learning Environments. In my time serving in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the US Department of Education, I came to understand how essential federal support of research and evidence-based resources are to schools, districts, and states, which often struggle to develop useful tools on their own.

One tangible example of where Congressional and federal leadership would be exceedingly helpful toward improving the conditions for student learning is in the support and establishment of what's known as "Early Warning Systems" across our education system. Effective Early Warning Systems aggregate vital indicators of student attendance, success, and wellness and turn the data into actionable recommendations for educators to meet the needs of all students, particularly those who are disengaged and disaffected. For instance, an Early Warning Systems can signal to a school principal, counselor, or teacher when a student is beginning to fall off-track academically, in their daily attendance, and even in their interactions with other students and adults. This data can then be effectively used for preventative purposes, strengthening school climate and promoting the success of all students. With Early Warning Systems, schools can be proactive and ultimately much more effective at identifying potentially troubled students and getting them the support and structures they need when they need it, like mental healthcare or adult mentoring. Early Warning Systems should be included in the essential infrastructure our nation funds and sustains to keep our schools the safest places they can be for our children.

That said, in our urgency to act following the tragedy in Parkland, I would caution Congress as well as my fellow educators and citizens to understand and avoid what doesn't work to make

our schools safer places for students to learn and grow. I say this because I've grown troubled in recent days by discussions and responses to the shooting suggesting that safer schools can't also be supportive schools that work to reduce unnecessary and harmful exclusionary discipline, like suspensions and expulsions—or that there is a link between the equitable treatment of children and the decision of a man to murder 17 people in a school. The bottom line is that in our effort to make schools safer, we simply cannot go back to the days of zero tolerance policies that not only failed to enhance safety but resulted in the push-out of millions of children of all backgrounds from our schools, thus creating a corrosive school-to-prison pipeline that funnels far too many children into the criminal justice system.

As stated in the 2014 School Discipline Consensus Report, a bipartisan project of the Council of State Governments, “research and data on school discipline practices are clear: millions of students are being removed from their classrooms each year, mostly in middle and high schools, and overwhelmingly for minor misconduct. When suspended, these students are at a significantly higher risk of falling behind academically, dropping out of school, and coming into contact with the juvenile justice system. A disproportionately large percentage of disciplined students are youth of color, students with disabilities, and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).” It is therefore bad policy and practice to do anything that further exacerbates the rates of suspensions—like not being smart about the difference between minor misconduct and potentially criminal behavior—in our schools that are leading far too many young people to become disengaged from school and thus without positive prospects for their future, leaving them less healthy, less able to achieve a decent quality of life, and more likely to engage in destructive, even criminal, behaviors.

Furthermore, data tell us that we should avoid the urge to dramatically expand the reach of police power into schools. While there is no conclusive data that school police, or school resource officers, make schools safer places on their own, we do know that school resources officers who are not well-trained to work effectively in a school environment do lead to an increase in unnecessary suspensions and expulsions from school. This is unfair both to the resource officers and to our students and why, in 2016, the US Departments of Education and Justice jointly issued the Safe, School-based Enforcement through Collaboration, Understanding, and Respect (SECURE) Rubrics that outline research and evidence-based best practices for effectively integrating school resources officers into the learning environment. We need to put our school police, where they are used, in the best possible position to enhance the safety and climate of any school, and the SECURE Rubrics can help.

We have before us an historic opportunity to make the United States a more perfect union by learning from recent tragedy the right lessons. When it comes to the safety of students and

adults in schools, we only need to act on what we know works and do far less of what we know doesn't work. We have a fairly comprehensible roadmap to accomplish this by understanding, supporting, and investing in infrastructure and school climate improvements, and by dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline that does nothing to make school safer. Thank you for your time this afternoon and I look forward to your questions.