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June 18, 2019

Governor Tom Wolf  
Office of the Governor  
508 Main Capitol Building  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Wolf:

We write seeking your commitment to keep our public schools safe for the students and the educators who attend them. Specifically, we write to express the Education Law Center (ELC)'s **strong opposition to Senate Bill 621** and urge you to veto the bill, in any form it arrives on your desk.

ELC's opposition to SB 621 is informed by our more than 40 years of experience as a statewide, legal advocacy non-profit for parents, students and families in public education. Our experience as civil rights lawyers, our decades of work at the forefront of local, state, and national efforts to improve school climate, and our engagement with national education leaders, statewide coalitions, judges, teachers, students, parents, and community advocates - many of whom are part of school communities where armed personnel currently operate - compel us to oppose SB 621.

We share the Commonwealth's goal to ensure that schools are safe place for students to learn and educators to work. Students, parents, and educators tell us that genuine school safety requires promoting a sense of physical, emotional, and psychological security for students, including through the interpersonal interactions they have with individuals within the school building. Research supports this: the presence of mental health professionals, counselors, and other caring adults in schools has been shown to play a more critical role in making a school safe than increased security measures.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, efforts to increase security have not been shown to improve student safety. Studies comparing schools that added School Resource Officers (SROs) and/or School Police Officers (SPOs) to those that did not found "no evidence suggesting that SRO or other sworn law enforcement officers contribute to school safety" nationwide<sup>2</sup> and "no notable differences" in rates of reporting of school incidents in Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> School districts already have the authority to arm their school police or school resources officers.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Matthew Steinberg, Elaine Allensworth and David W. Johnson, Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools: The Roles of Community Context and School Social Organization (May 2001), <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/SAFETY%20IN%20CPS.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Chongmin Na and Denise C. Gottfredson, "Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors," Justice Quarterly, (2011) pp. 1-32, <https://ccjs.umd.edu/sites/ccjs.umd.edu/files/pubs/Police%20Officers%20in%20Schools->.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Schools and Communities, "School Resource Officer Evaluation, Phase One" September 2005, pp. 68- 69.

Armed school police is not a role that should be contracted out – especially to independent security contractors who are not required to have even the same law enforcement background that has yet to improve school safety. SB 621 represents a dangerous loosening of the existing restrictions on who can be armed in schools.

There are a number of reasons why armed personnel fail to promote student safety. Among them is the reality that they are a constant presence in the school and often used to handle daily, student matters that are better handled by school personnel. This reality conflicts with their stated purpose of preventing a mass attack, an exceedingly rare occurrence in schools. Armed personnel are unlikely to be trauma-informed, making them ill-equipped to respond to the schoolchildren they regularly encounter, roughly 60 percent of whom have likely suffered or witnessed some form of trauma within the previous year.<sup>4</sup> Both in and out of school, the actions of armed security personnel are most likely to have the deadliest consequences for the most marginalized individuals, including people of color and those with disabilities.

We note that SB621 has been amended to include modest training requirements for third-party security personnel. However, students and parents continue to tell us that investing in these type of security measures – regardless of the level of training – make our schools feel less safe and more like prisons, rather than places of learning. We fear the dire consequences that may result from this legislation, under the guise of improved safety.

Because we share your desire to protect students and ensure schools are safe places, we urge you to veto SB 621 in any form it arrives at your desk. Instead, we support and join you in calling for more education funding to ensure that every student in the Commonwealth has access to school counselors, mental health professionals, and other professionals who are actually in the best position to keep students physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe.

Respectfully submitted,



Reynelle Brown Staley  
Policy Director

cc: Mike Brunelle, Chief of Staff  
Meg Snead, Secretary of Policy and Planning  
Allison Jones, Deputy Secretary of Policy and Planning  
Minority Leader Jay Costa  
Chairman Vincent J. Hughes  
Minority Leader Frank Dermody  
Chairman Matthew D. Bradford

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<sup>4</sup> Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Juvenile Justice Bulletin, U.S. Dep't of Justice, National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence 5 (September 2015), [https://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/248547.pdf?ed2f26df2d9c416fbddddd2330a778c6=nnxrpdoznnzubdzrr&utm\\_source=youth.gov&utm\\_medium=federal-links&utm\\_campaign=reports-and-resources](https://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/248547.pdf?ed2f26df2d9c416fbddddd2330a778c6=nnxrpdoznnzubdzrr&utm_source=youth.gov&utm_medium=federal-links&utm_campaign=reports-and-resources).