

Illinois teachers union calls for legislation holding districts accountable to school safety requirements in wake of Michigan shooting

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Determined to protect students and teachers amid a troubling rise in violent student behavior, officials with Illinois' largest teachers union said Wednesday they are partnering with legislators to ensure school districts are complying with state school safety laws.

“What happened in Michigan two weeks ago is a tragedy. Every incident where someone in a school is injured at the hand of another is heartbreaking,” said Kathi Griffin, president of the Illinois Education Association, referring to the Nov. 30 shooting deaths of four students at a Detroit-area high school.

“Our educators should not have to constantly worry about their safety and the safety of their students,” Griffin said.

In 2019, lawmakers passed the IEA-proposed School Threat Assessment Bill — legislation that requires schools in Illinois to create a threat assessment team and to develop protocol on school violence and prevention, IEA officials said.

The legislation also expanded the use of the 1-cent county sales tax to help districts pay for school safety improvements, school resource officers or mental health professionals.

In addition, the law directs Illinois school districts to review their school building emergency and crisis response plans, and to include mental health professionals as well as law enforcement agencies on their assessment teams.

While officials said they hope Illinois school districts are already strictly following the law, they have no oversight system in place or data to detect if any districts are failing to comply with the requirements.

Illinois state Rep. Fred Crespo, a Democrat from Hoffman Estates, and state Rep. Tony McCombie, a Republican from Savanna, are sponsoring the new legislation, which aims to ensure all of the state's school districts are complying.

“Keeping schools safe, free of violence, making sure that students have a learning environment that is welcoming and open to all is paramount to having a strong school community,” Crespo said.

“This legislation was meant to bring a similar assessment plan to districts across the state — no matter the size — and this leads to a better Illinois,” he said.

“Ideally, in a situation like what happened in Michigan, the threat assessment team would have been called upon and intervened to get the student the help they need before tragedy occurs,” McCombie added.

“That’s the intent of these laws,” McCombie said. “The children of our state are our most important asset. We must ensure threat assessment plans are not only created, but also followed to keep our students safe.”

Griffin reminded school districts they can use the roughly \$7 billion in federal COVID-19 relief funding awarded to Illinois schools to hire more staff to support students dealing with mental health issues.

“We need to make sure we are doing everything we can from a security standpoint, but also we need to make sure we are addressing the trauma that our students are going through,” Griffin said.

This week, two DuPage County students were arrested for allegedly making threats of violence to schools on social media, and a McHenry County teen was arrested for an alleged school threat scrawled on a bathroom stall.

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