



# teenTALK

TALKING • LISTENING • TAKING ACTION

Pennsylvania OFFICE OF ATTORNEY GENERAL

---

## Report on the Impact of GUN VIOLENCE ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH



Michelle A. Henry  
Pennsylvania Attorney General

As we recognize National Gun Violence Awareness Month, the Office of Attorney General is releasing this report as a resource to students, parents, educators, community leaders, elected officials, and every stakeholder involved in prioritizing the well-being of youth, as we all work to combat gun violence. Gun violence is an epidemic that affects the lives of

Pennsylvanians every single day – and it impacts each community differently. Most troubling is the unprecedented increase in the number of children traumatized by gun violence in our country. The consequences of gun violence – from the fear that it may strike a community, to the devastation it leaves behind – have taken a serious toll on the mental health of young people at a time when their mental health is already strained by pressures including academic slide lingering from the COVID-19 pandemic, bullying/cyber-bullying, impossible-to-attain social media lifestyle standards, and more.

In order to better understand what our students are dealing with and how we as a community can help them, I hosted a series of **teenTALK** roundtables to learn firsthand from high school students. These students are our future leaders and in the best position to provide information about what is happening in schools. The school districts we visited, Steelton, Hazelton, McKeesport and Philadelphia, – represent a geographic sampling of schools throughout the Commonwealth. The schools opened their doors to me and the students spoke candidly about the issue of gun violence. I am grateful to them for participating and trusting me with their insights. I undertook this effort not just because it is important to me personally, but because the information I sought has the potential to inform the work of teachers, stakeholders and the Office of Attorney General in a myriad of ways.

These conversations allowed me to hear directly from students about how they have been impacted by gun violence and, importantly, how they think adults can best support them. The roundtables also highlighted the many things that parents, educators, and even students themselves can do to change the conversation, address gun violence head-on, and prevent unnecessary harm.



Attorney General Michelle Henry met with Hazleton High School students on December 13, 2023

Teachers and administrators in our schools do their best every day to prevent and address violence, and it is important to continue the conversation about what else can be done. Until every student can grow up free from the scourge of gun violence, we must continue to strive to build schools and communities that root out damaging behaviors, protect students' mental well-being, and provide support for those who have already been harmed.

Based on these discussions, my office has compiled this **teenTALK** Report. I am deeply committed to protecting all of Pennsylvania's students, and I look forward to continuing the conversations started by the **teenTALK** roundtables.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. A. Henry". The signature is stylized with large, bold letters and a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Michelle A. Henry

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



5	<b>Special Thanks</b>
6	<b>About the teenTALK Roundtables</b>
8	<b>What we heard</b>
	— Concern: Guns and Other Weapons are Commonplace
	— Concern: Mental Health Impact
	— Concern: The Influence of Social Media
	— Concern: Lack of Transparency and Communication
19	<b>Strategies Identified by teenTALK Participants</b>
23	<b>Conclusion</b>
25	<b>Closing Thoughts</b>

---

## Disclaimer:

This report was developed as a resource guide summarizing the ideas and recommendations discussed during the **teenTALK** sessions hosted by the Office of Attorney General and held throughout the Commonwealth during the 2023-24 school year. This report does not constitute legal advice. Schools are encouraged to seek legal advice from legal counsel regarding the implementation of any recommendation contained in the report. Each school entity should make policy and program decisions based on the unique needs of their staff, students, and community.

This document contains references and hyperlinks to third party sources that contain information that may be helpful to schools in evaluating particular policies or programs. These references and hyperlinks are provided only as a convenience to you. The Office of Attorney General makes no representations, warranties, or endorsements concerning the content of any third party site.



## SPECIAL THANKS

Attorney General Michelle A. Henry and her staff extend their gratitude to the 90 students that participated in the **teenTALK** roundtables. Without their willingness to engage in courageous conversations about a traumatizing issue, this report would not be possible. The **teenTALK** conversations provided insight about what Pennsylvania students are experiencing, and a better understanding of what we can do to support them.

The following individuals were instrumental in the creation of this report. They actively participated in the **teenTALK** roundtables, provided suggestions and recommendations.

Jayme Banks, Ed.D., Deputy Chief of Prevention, Intervention, and Trauma, School District of Philadelphia

Kevin Bethel, former Chief of School Safety, School District of Philadelphia

Anthony Conston, Ed.D., Principal, Hazleton Area High School

Lena Cordero, Ph.D., Principal, Steelton-Highspire Junior/Senior High School

Megan Davis, M.Ed., School Counselor, Hazleton Area High School

Tarah Gross, M.Ed., Vice Principal, Steelton-Highspire Junior/Senior High School

Tomás Hanna, M.Ed., Associate Superintendent of Secondary Schools, School District of Philadelphia

Beth Ann Harris, PsyD, School Psychologist, Hazleton Area School District

Aaron Hoda, School Psychology Intern, Hazleton Area School District

Mick Iskrick, Jr., Ed.D., Superintendent, Steelton-Highspire School District

Melodee Jackson, Work-based Learning Coordinator, CTE, School District of Philadelphia

Scott Kuren, Ed.D., Director, Office for Safe Schools, Pennsylvania Department of Education

Dale McCall, M.Ed., Principal, McKeesport Area School District

Robert Mehalick, Assistant to the Superintendent for Student Services, Hazleton Area School District

Dana Milakovic, PsyD, Mental Wellness and Trauma Specialist, Office for Safe Schools, Pennsylvania Department of Education

Ariel B. Peterson, School Improvement and Data Specialist, School District of Philadelphia

Carlos Rivas, Supervisor, Student Services 9-12, Hazleton Area School District

Willie Slade, M.Ed., Assistant Superintendent, Steelton-Highspire School District

Malika Savoy-Brooks, Ed.D., Former Assistant Superintendent of Special Projects, School District of Philadelphia

Celeste Tejeda, PsyD, Bilingual Psychology Clinician, Hazleton Area School District

Brian Uplinger, Ed.D., Superintendent, Hazleton Area School District

Tia M. Wanzo, Ed.D., Superintendent, McKeesport Area School District

Michelle Warner, Transition Coordinator and Case Manager, Steelton-Highspire School District

Tony Watlington, Ed.D., Superintendent, School District of Philadelphia

Kristie Zoller, Psy.D., Laughlin Children's Center

## ABOUT THE teenTALK ROUNDTABLES

Gun violence is a serious concern across communities throughout the United States, including the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Recent data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that the gun death rate among children and teens rose 50% between 2019 and 2021.<sup>1</sup> Another study, released by the American Academy of Pediatrics Journal, of individuals aged 1-18 identified an 87% increase in the gun death rate between 2011 and 2021.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, gun fatalities are now the leading cause of accidental death for 1-19 year-olds.<sup>3</sup>

While mass school shooting events remain rare statistically, other incidents of gun violence impact schools and communities far too often. The fear of any of these events happening, along with the traumatic after-effects, create negative social, emotional, physical and academic outcomes among those who were directly impacted or witnessed.

To help address this problem, Attorney General Michelle A. Henry engaged high school students and school administrators for a series of roundtables held across the Commonwealth during the 2023/24 school year to talk about gun violence, mental health and other issues impacting our schools today.

These events brought together students and administrators from four districts across four counties. Because student voice/student engagement is a necessary component in any effort to empower students to have a role in problem-solving, the **teenTALK** sessions were student-centered, facilitated conversations with Attorney General Henry.

- Hazleton Area School District
  - Luzerne County
- McKeesport Area School District
  - Allegheny County
- School District of Philadelphia
  - Philadelphia County
- Steelton-Highspire School District
  - Dauphin County

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<sup>2</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics Journal

<sup>3</sup> University of Michigan, Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention

The events were designed as free-flowing discussions on gun violence – what works to prevent it, what doesn't work, what adults should do, how to increase student reporting, and more. During those conversations, Attorney General Henry and the students explored a variety of topics that impact school climate and safety, including:

- Communication and Transparency
- Conflict Resolution
- Fear of Retaliation
- Impact of Negative School Stigma
- Parent/Family Engagement
- Peer Mediation
- School Resource Officers
- Social Media Impacts
- Stress Reduction – calming strategies
- Student Connectedness
- Student Mental Health
- Student Opportunities
- Student Support Personnel (e.g., school counselors and school psychologists)
- Student/Teacher Relationships
- Trauma-Sensitive Schools

AG Henry Meets with  
McKeesport Students to Discuss  
the Impact of Gun Violence on  
Youth Mental Health on  
June 1, 2023



## WHAT WE HEARD

The students who participated in the **teenTALK** Roundtables are our future leaders. They want an active role in the process of finding solutions. The students expressed concerns about all aspects of gun violence – from the contributing factors that underlie gun violence; apprehension of suspects and the aftermath to gun incidents; challenges in communication transparency during and after safety lockdowns, access to mental health supports, and more. The **teenTALK** students were forthcoming with their feelings and recommendations and are motivated to address the increase in gun-related deaths of American youth. It was clear that they crave information and want to understand what is happening in real time – they view this as essential to achieving a safe learning environment.

There were recurring thoughts and themes among the students who spoke. Summarized below are the main concerns that were discussed at the four **teenTALK** Roundtables. Certainly, these are not unique to the students we spoke with, and this is not an exhaustive list of all possible controversies or solutions associated with gun violence. These concerns are highlighted in this report because we heard them from the **teenTALK** students and because our research shows that these themes are widespread among all Pennsylvania students. It is recommended that schools discuss these, and other trepidations, raised by students with their stakeholders – pupils, staff, families and community members.



## CONCERN: Guns and Other Weapons are Commonplace

Students at all four **teenTALK** Roundtables talked about the availability of guns, and expressed their anxiety that gun violence can happen at any time. They mentioned that students have access to guns or other weapons via family members, gang involvement, or illegal purchases on the street or online. Many students indicated fear of community violence as they travel to and from school, and that they know of students who carry weapons to protect themselves both in and out of school. They also acknowledge that while the fear of being involved in a physical altercation has decreased (ex. a fist-fight), the fear of being attacked with a weapon, at arm's length or greater, has increased. Students indicated that when they were younger, if a conflict arose between two students, the biggest fear was that a physical altercation would result. Now they fear that a weapon will be used to "settle" the conflict. Students also shared their fear of escalation in violence or retaliation if they report seeing weapons, or social media posts by students about weapons.

## What the Research Shows

According to an investigation conducted by The Washington Post, more than 1,150 guns were confiscated in K-12 schools during the 2022-2023 school year, as reported by media outlets.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the number of guns found in U.S. schools, as well as the number of guns that are never detected, is likely a great deal higher. The same investigation revealed that 58% of guns seized in 51 of the nation's largest school systems were not reported in the media.<sup>5</sup>

According to the CDC, seven children die per day in the United States from firearms, with most gun deaths among youth resulting from homicides (60%).<sup>6</sup> Other alarming statistics were reported by the CDC about youth-aged gun violence victims, including:

- Boys are four times more likely than girls to die by firearm
- Teenagers 12 – 17 are over six times more likely to die by firearm than younger youth
- Black youth are roughly five times more likely than their white counterparts to die from gun violence<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Robert Klemko, John Woodrow Cox, Lizzie Johnson and Steven Rich, "Guns are seized in U.S. schools each day. The numbers are soaring." The Washington Post, October 10, 2023.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/10/10/guns-schools-us-increased-prevention-violence/>

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>CDC

<sup>7</sup>CDC



During the 2022-2023 school year, the Safe2Say Something anonymous tip line managed by the Office of Attorney General received 31,027 tips. Thirty seven (37) weapons were recovered in Pennsylvania as a result of Safe2Say tips in 2022-23, with a total of 89 weapons recovered since the inception of the program in 2019. Safe2Say Something is a youth violence prevention program run by the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General. The program teaches youth and adults how to recognize warning signs and signals, especially within social media, from individuals who may be a threat to themselves or others and to “say something” BEFORE it is too late.

Since 1989, the Commonwealth has conducted a survey of school students in the 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th grades to learn about their behavior, attitudes and knowledge concerning alcohol, tobacco, other drugs and violence. The ‘Pennsylvania Youth Survey,’ or PAYS, is sponsored and conducted every two years, by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

More than 246,000 Pennsylvania students attending school districts, charter schools and private schools located in 66 of the 67 counties participated in the 2021 administration of the PAYS. The following percentage of responding students reported their experiences with weapons on school property<sup>8</sup>:

	Statewide	Allegheny	Dauphin	Luzerne
Threatened with weapon at school	3.5%	4.1%	3.6%	4.1%
Attacked with weapon at school	1.1%	1.2%	1.4%	1.5%
Brought weapon to school	0.8%	0.7%	1.0%	0.7%

Note: A county report containing aggregate is prepared for every county that had a minimum of two school districts participate. As such, a county level report was not prepared for Philadelphia County.

<sup>8</sup> 2021 PA Youth Survey



## CONCERN: Mental Health Impact

Students at all four **teenTALK** Roundtables spoke at great length about the negative impact guns and the threat of gun violence pose to for the community at large, but most specifically to young people. Students talked about the stressors they face in everyday life, including:

- Academic concerns
- Friend drama
- Family dynamic
- Societal expectations

They indicated that while counselors are invested in helping their students, there aren't enough counselors to help everyone who may seek assistance.

They also expressed distress that following a safety lockdown event, not enough attention is given to allaying fears or restoring feelings of safety among students. Students reported that they are expected to get back to normal school operations too quickly after an event, and sometimes even during a safety lockdown (e.g., when there is a community threat near the school, not targeting the school itself). They stated that it is incredibly hard to “switch gears” between fear that they, their peers, school staff or community members could be injured or killed, to taking a quiz or doing a class assignment. The students collectively expressed a desire to have time to process the trauma of these events, noting that some students need more time and attention than others.

## What the Research Shows

Since the worldwide COVID pandemic, student mental health has suffered. According to the CDC, almost 15% of U.S. adolescents were treated for mental health disorders in 2021.<sup>9</sup> The same report revealed that approximately 3 in 5 U.S. girls indicated that they felt “persistently sad or helpless.” According to 2021 PAYS data, 40% of Pennsylvania students reported that they felt sad or depressed most days in the past year, and almost 19% seriously considered attempting suicide.<sup>10</sup> PAYS includes one question about self-harm and four questions that ask students about feelings—sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness—that can be symptoms of depression. PAYS also asks five questions specific to suicide, measuring depressed behavior, suicidal intention, actual suicide attempts, and the seriousness of those attempts (by asking about resulting medical intervention). The 2021 student responses to these questions across all grades revealed higher levels of concerning thoughts, feelings and/or actions over prior administration years.

---

<sup>9</sup> CDC - <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/12/health/children-mental-health-treatment/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> 2021 PA Youth Survey

Gun violence can have adverse impacts on student mental health. Students who are exposed to gun violence demonstrate higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety, as well as other mental health concerns. Gun violence may also lead to problems at school, including increased absenteeism and difficulty concentrating.<sup>11</sup>

Experiencing a school lockdown is trauma-inducing for students and adults alike. Leading childhood trauma expert, Dr. Marlene Wong, refers to this type of trauma as “invisible wounds” that are “immediate, urgent, and often both physical and emotional.”<sup>12</sup> These impacts may be exacerbated by the age of the affected individual. The Washington Post conducted a yearlong school violence review, and found that students in preschool programs participated in lockdown drills which required them to “play dead” and hide in dark rooms. They found that it was not unusual for students of all ages to have negative, physical traumatic responses, including soiling themselves, passing out, panicking, or crying during or right after these experiences.<sup>13</sup>

Other less overt traumatic responses to lockdowns and lockdown drills include stress, anxiety, disengagement, and withdrawal.<sup>14</sup> The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) concurs with this statement, indicating that lockdown drills do not increase the feeling of safety among students, and may make students more fearful.<sup>15</sup> In fact, lockdown drills that are not conducted in a trauma-informed manner may cause even greater trauma for students and teachers, rather than increasing their preparedness to handle an actual emergency.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-adolescents/#:~:text=Exposure%20to%20gun%20violence%20is,increased%20absenteeism%20and%20difficulty%20concentrating\\_](https://www.kff.org/mental-health/issue-brief/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-adolescents/#:~:text=Exposure%20to%20gun%20violence%20is,increased%20absenteeism%20and%20difficulty%20concentrating_) <sup>12</sup><https://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ordinary-magic/202210/after-the-lockdown-learning-students-experiences>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ordinary-magic/202210/after-the-lockdown-learning-students-experiences>

<sup>14</sup> Greco, V. (2021). The Casualties You Don't See: The Omnipresent Trauma of School Shootings. Dress Rehearsals for Gun Violence: Confronting Trauma and Anxiety in America's Schools, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ass'n of Sch. Psychologists

<sup>16</sup> Lauen Ryss, School Shooting Simulations: At What Point Does Preparation Become More Harmful Than Helpful?, 35 CHILD. LEGAL RTS. J. 215, 221-22 (2015).





Photos by Kyle Nelson/For the Post-Gazette

McKeesport Superintendent Tia Wanzo, left, listens as Brenda Sawyer, president of McKeesport NAACP Unit #2269, speaks at McKeesport Area High School on Wednesday.

# STUDENTS TALK, PA. AG LISTENS

## Gun violence impact initiative kicks off at McKeesport High

By Maddie Aiken  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pennsylvania Attorney General Michelle Henry walked into the McKeesport Area High School hallway that was accessorized with artwork on the ceilings and celebratory ribbons on blue lockers. In a nearby classroom, McKeesport students, teachers and administrators laughed and made small talk as they waited to meet Ms. Henry.

But after cheerful introductions, a somber discussion followed. Ms. Henry visited the high school Wednesday to kick off a statewide campaign about the impact of gun violence on young people.

"It's important that we listen to [students], that we learn from them, and that we share what we've learned," Ms. Henry said. "This was our first stop of many to learn from these students."

At McKeesport, select students had the opportunity to candidly share their thoughts with Ms. Henry on gun violence in their community and its impact on their mental health. Ms. Henry will hear from other Pennsylvania students throughout June, which is Gun Violence Awareness Month.

After the discussions, Ms. Henry hopes to compile a report on how the state can better



Pennsylvania Attorney General Michelle Henry kicked off a statewide campaign on the impact of gun violence Wednesday.

support students.

"We know the social impact that [gun violence] has on students is negative," Ms. Henry said. "I want to hear firsthand from them."

Though 2023 hasn't reached the halfway point, there have already been more fatal

shootings in McKeesport this year than last year.

The city of about 17,700 people has seen seven shooting deaths in 2023. Two people were fatally shot in February, including McKeesport police Officer Sean Sluganski, four were killed during one week in March, and one man was found dead in his apartment in May. The violence is a growing concern for residents.

McKeesport senior Joslyn Fulmore, who participated in the roundtable, said she was close with one of the victims killed this year. Ms. Fulmore said she appreciated the Wednesday discussion and other efforts the district has taken to help students.

"[During the roundtable,] I was able to really be heard and [share] how I feel about gun violence," she said. "It was really nice for somebody as important as [Ms. Henry] to be able to listen to us."

To promote safety and support students, McKeesport Area School District has already partnered with Safe2Say, a youth violence prevention program run by Ms. Henry's office that allows students to anonymously report dangers or warning signs.

The school district also has on-site

SEE **GUN VIOLENCE**, PAGE B-3

## CONCERN: The Influence of Social Media

The **teenTALK** students spent a large portion of the roundtables discussing the influence of social media on all aspects of their lives. They talked about how easy it is for children to create accounts on social media platforms, even when they are under the minimum user age established by the platform. They talked about the high degree of peer pressure to be on TikTok, Snapchat, and other social media platforms and that peer pressure intensifies once they are on the platforms, as they feel influence from real-life and virtual friends to keep up appearances. The social media climate leads to students spending exorbitant amounts of time on these apps, often foregoing homework, sleep, and family interactions in favor of connecting with virtual friends or scrolling through recommended content.

The students expressed worries about the use of social media to glorify fights and provide a platform for bullying, harassment, and threats. They were troubled that exposure to these types of harmful and sometimes violent content may cause young and impressionable viewers to see these actions as “normal,” thereby increasing the likelihood that they may condone similar behaviors, at best, or engage in them themselves, at worst. Students also talked about seeing content posted by schoolmates that include threats, or even posing with guns in pictures or videos. The students talked about the fear that these types of messages raise, along with the apprehension of retaliation if they report what they’ve seen to school or law enforcement authorities.

# LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

*Pa. Attorney general talks to Hazleton Area students about guns*

BY KENT JACKSON  
STAFF WRITER

HAZLE TWP. — A bullet can wound victims it never strikes, Pennsylvania Attorney General Michelle Henry said before asking students at Hazleton Area High School how guns affect them.

“They are grappling with this, whether it’s a situation where a friend has been shot or wounded. How can we treat that? It has a ripple effect on these students in terms of their mental health,” Henry said.

Henry attended school on Wednesday so students could be her teacher as she prepares a report about reducing gun violence and helping young people deal with the psychological and physical aftereffects.

“Our goal today is really to hear from them,” she said

*‘They’re open. They’re honest. They’re insightful, and we learn a lot from them.’*

Michelle Henry  
Pennsylvania attorney general

before meeting in private with 22 students in the library. “... How can we look for ways to reduce gun violence, and when it does happen, be able to support them in the best way possible?”

In earlier discussions at schools in Allegheny, Dauphin and Philadelphia counties, Henry said students told her that their worries ranged from gangs to friends with guns to shooters inside schools.

“They’re open. They’re honest. They’re insightful, and we learn a lot from them,” she said.

As she and other visitors

entered the school, they passed through scanners, developed for sports stadiums, that check people and bags for weapons and explosives.

Hazleton Area purchased the first scanner 18 months ago for \$1 million at the high school and has placed scanners in some other schools.

Red-shirted security guards checked people in at the front desk and moved through the halls during the morning.

“Our buildings are very safe,” Superintendent Brian Uplinger said, but he acknowledged they’re not

invulnerable.

“No building is,” but “when they’re here they feel safe,” he said. “Once they leave us, it’s out of our control.”

Charles Marchetti, a student in 12th grade, who briefly stepped out of the forum with Henry to talk with reporters, mentioned the scanners, but also students who died from guns.

“It’s a shame to see that in our home town,” Marchetti said.

In the past two years four teenagers, including two high school seniors, have been shot and killed in the Hazleton area.

Students won’t ever forget their deaths, Uplinger said.

“It sticks with them,” he said. “That increases the

Please see **GUNS**, Page A4

## HAZLETON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

# Attorney general, students meet, discuss gun violence

Private session also included administrators, counselors

BY KENT JACKSON  
STAFF WRITER

HAZLETON — A bullet can wound victims it never strikes, Pennsylvania Attorney General Michelle Henry said before asking students at Hazleton Area High School how guns affect them.

"They are grappling with this, whether it's a situation where a friend has been shot or wounded. How can we treat that? It has a ripple effect on these students in terms of their mental health," Henry said.

Henry attended school on Wednesday so students could be her teacher as she prepares a report about reducing gun violence and helping young people deal with the psychological and physical aftereffects.

"Our goal today is really to hear from them," she said before meeting in private with 22 students in the library. "How can we look for ways to reduce gun violence, and when it does happen, be able to support them in the best way possible?"

In earlier discussions at schools in Allegheny, Dauphin and Philadelphia counties, Henry said students told her that their worries ranged from gangs to friends with guns to shooters inside schools.

"They're open, they're honest," she said. "They're



JOHN HAEGER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Pennsylvania Attorney General Michelle Henry talks Wednesday with Hazleton Area High School students before a roundtable discussion with students, administrators and counselors about how gun violence affects young people and their mental health.**

insightful, and we learn a lot from them."

As she and other visitors entered the school, they passed through scanners, developed for sports stadiums, that check people and bags for weapons and explosives.

Hazleton Area purchased the first scanner, for \$1 million, 18 months ago for the high school and has placed scanners in some other schools.

Red-shirted security guards checked people in at

the front desk and moved through the halls during the morning.

"Our buildings are very safe," Superintendent Brian Uplinger said, but he acknowledged they're not invulnerable.

"No building is, but when they're here they feel safe," he said. "Once they leave us, it's out of our control."

Charles Marchetti, a 12th grader who briefly stepped out of the forum with Henry to talk with reporters, mentioned the scanners, but also

students who died from guns.

"It's a shame to see that in our hometown," Marchetti said.

In the past two years four teenagers, including two high school seniors, have been shot and killed in the Hazleton area.

Students won't ever forget their deaths, Uplinger said.

"It sticks with them," the superintendent said. "That increases the angst they're feeling."

Please see **STUDENTS**, Page A6



## What the Research Shows

The use of social media among adolescents is ubiquitous. In fact, approximately 95% of young people aged 13-17 report using at least one social media platform. Further, more than 60% of teens use social media every day, with about 33% indicating they use social media “almost constantly.”<sup>17,18</sup> Further, the American Psychological Association reports that, on average, U.S. teens spend 4.8 hours on social media platforms daily.<sup>19</sup>

The Office of Attorney General joined a multi-state lawsuit against Meta Platforms, Inc. (Meta) in October 2023, alleging that Meta knew that young users, including those under 13, were active on its platforms, and knowingly collected data from these users without parental consent. Federal law prohibits social media platforms from enrolling users under age 13.

The suit further alleges that Meta uses platform algorithms to push users into constant interaction with their platforms in an effort to maximize profit. Features like infinite scroll and near-constant alerts at all hours of the day were created with a specific goal of hooking young users. These manipulative tactics continually lure children and teens back onto the platform.

Meta allegedly knew these addictive features harmed young people’s physical and mental health, including undermining their ability to get adequate sleep, but it did not disclose the harm nor did it make meaningful changes to minimize the harm.

*“Meta has preyed on the vulnerability of young users seeking validation and approval from peers, it has resulted in challenges with body image, self-worth, and a skewed sense of what is normal in the world offline.”*

— Attorney General Michelle Henry

Concerns about social media’s negative mental health impacts on youth led the U.S. Surgeon General to issue a warning about usage among youth, stating, “we cannot conclude that social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents.”<sup>20</sup> That advisory, The Social Media and Youth Mental Health Advisory, identified a host of mental and physical health negative impacts found among youth spending three or more hours on social media platforms including:

- Poor sleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Online harassment
- Poor body image
- Low self-esteem
- Higher depressive symptom scores  
(with a larger association for girls than boys)
- Self-harm

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web\\_0.pdf](https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/04/teen-social-use-mental-health>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/youth-mental-health/social-media/index.html>

## CONCERN:

### Lack of Transparency and Communication

Students across all four **teenTALK** sessions expressed concerns and frustrations about the lack of transparency regarding lockdown events and asked for clearer communication from school administration. They indicated that it is important to let students know about the type of lockdown as it is happening (e.g., external threat, internal threat, restricted movement, etc.) and to the extent possible, the ultimate resolution of the precipitating event.

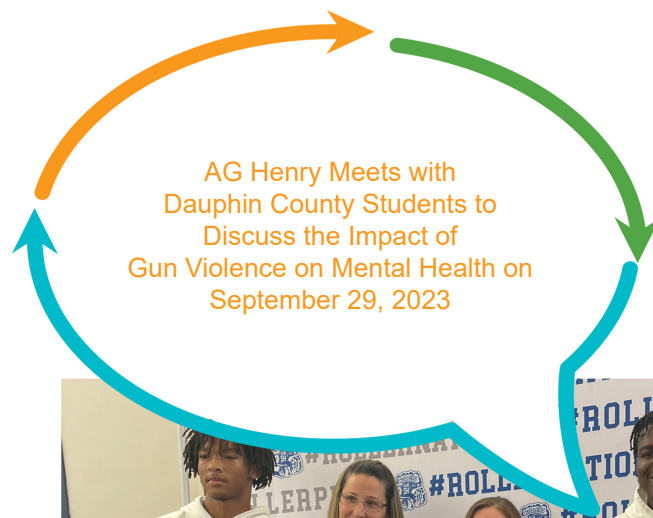
Some students reported that during and after lockdown events, they are expected to perform academically as if nothing has happened. They stated that some teachers give tests, quizzes, or lecture during the lockdown, without acknowledging the lockdown or providing the students with time to process what is happening. While schools often make announcements that students who need support or want to talk about the lockdown with a counselor may go to a specific location to do so, the **teenTALK** participants indicated that not many students take advantage of this, often because of the stigma associated with seeking mental health help.

### What the Research Shows

Ensuring that the lines of communication are open between schools, families, and students is a best practice recommendation. Additionally, school administrations that prioritize transparency garner more trust than those that withhold information. Providing clear communication and the willingness to be transparent is even more crucial with regard to school safety concerns, including lockdown events and practice or drills. NASP encourages schools “to provide as much clear, direct information as possible..., communicate clearly during the lockdown whether or not there is imminent danger to the school, and train staff to reassure distressed students through the use of stabilization and grounding techniques.”

The Kentucky Department of Education defines trauma-informed lockdown drills as drills that are “tailored to meet the unique needs of schools and their students and staff. . . [and] designed to minimize the potential for causing or creating a traumatic experience for students and staff participating in the safety exercises.” They further recommend:

- Announcing drills in advance
- Adapting language and activities to address varying developmental levels, and
- Attending to needs of students and staff with Individual Education Plans or 504 plans or other special circumstances



## STRATEGIES IDENTIFIED BY teenTALK PARTICIPANTS

While students identified four main areas of concern during the **teenTALK** Roundtables, their recommendations are more expansive. As such, implementing the following suggestions can provide positive impacts in more than one area.

We recognize that every school community and environment is unique, and varies by factors including: size; geography; urban, suburban, or rural settings; public, private, or charter; population served; and more. Nonetheless the following list, compiled after Roundtable discussions throughout the state, are strikingly similar in their guidance, and goals, regardless of where the students reside or attend school.

This list is not exhaustive, and every school is encouraged to seek out their own ideas for improvements in policies and processes by collaborating with students, staff, community organizations, peers at other schools, local law enforcement, and other key stakeholders.

The **teenTALK** students identified the following strategies to address their concerns:

### **1) Improve communication between school officials and students to decrease negative mental health impacts and promote trust.**

While some information cannot be shared due to operational security and privacy laws, schools should explain why they can't share some information and make every effort to share what information they can with stakeholders. Sharing of information leads to increased trust and confidence among schools, families, students and the community. While improving transparency and communication efforts are best practices at any time, these are especially critical during emergency situations.

Strategies to achieve this goal include:

- Refrain from the use of codes/code words to announce lockdowns and include the type of lockdown during the messaging. Use of codes/code words can cause confusion, create lags in response time, and/ or result in unintended false alarms.
- Establish clear lines of communication, engage in transparent communication, and use multiple communication methods to include all students and their families. School messaging systems that incorporate varied notification pathways (e.g., voicemail, email, text messaging, etc.) increase the likelihood that everyone who should be contacted receives critical information in a timely manner.
- Foster connections between students and staff. Students who feel connected to staff and school perform better academically than peers who don't feel a sense of belonging or connection. With connection comes trust, and when students feel connected with staff, they are more likely to report concerns they have about themselves and others.

## 2) Mental health services and solutions are needed to bolster student well-being and strengthen support at schools.

- Conduct Trauma-Sensitive lockdown drills. As discussed above, lockdown events and lockdown drills can be traumatic to students in general, but even more so for those who have had prior exposure to gun violence and/or for students who are neurodivergent and/or are already experiencing mental health struggles. Schools should take appropriate steps to lessen the negative impact of lockdown procedures. Additionally, time and space should be provided to allow students to calm after an emergency situation or drill. This mental health break is necessary before returning to academic engagement. For more information about trauma-sensitive efforts schools can undertake, visit the [Pennsylvania Department of Education's "Trauma Informed" webpage](#).
- Teach students how to regulate their emotions and seek help. These strategies are important components of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Students who are not able to regulate their emotions are more likely to engage in negative behaviors toward themselves or others. Schools that want to assure that students receive additional support and interventions when needed, must take steps to educate staff and students regarding available resources, including referrals to the Student Assistance Program (SAP). For more information about SEL implementation, visit the [Pennsylvania Department of Education's "Social Emotional Learning" webpage](#). For more information about SAP, visit the [Pennsylvania Department of Education's "SAP/PBIS" webpage](#).
- Train students in conflict resolution/peer mediation. As children get older, they are less likely to ask adults for help resolving conflicts with their peers, and more likely to address these issues on their own and in suboptimal ways. By educating students on how to de-escalate conflict; listen with the intent to understand; seek mutually agreeable solutions to problems; and recognize when adult intervention is necessary, students will have the tools needed to negotiate conflict in more appropriate and productive ways. Addressing conflict at this level also allows schools to focus formal disciplinary interventions on more serious infractions.
- Train students in Mental Health First Aid. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals needing mental health services has increased at a rate that has exceeded the capacity of mental health providers and facilities. Training students ages 12-18 in mental health first aid will make them more likely to recognize warning signs of mental health challenges exhibited by peers, and know how to connect them to help. For more information about Mental Health First Aid, visit the [Pennsylvania Department of Education's "Mental Health" webpage](#).
- Provide mental health supports to students and families who have experienced gun violence. SAP referrals should be made for any students who have experienced gun violence to ensure that they have access to trauma-informed supports and interventions. Receiving these services will help students



to process their trauma and grief constructively, and be better able to focus on learning. It is recommended that schools review their SAP policies and procedures to make certain they are aligned with current best practices. For more information on SAP training, visit the [Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance's website](#).

- Teach students, parents, staff and the community how to use Safe2Say Something (S2SS) to anonymously report concerns about guns, weapons, violence or other student safety issues. By increasing awareness of this important program, and training stakeholders on how and when to use S2SS, more individuals will use this platform to report all types of student safety issues. Since many of the **teenTALK** students identified concerns about retaliation from reporting incidents, use of this anonymous reporting system provides a mechanism to safely inform authorities without worrying about retaliation.
- Increase the number of counselors, social workers, psychologists and other school-based mental health supports. All four **teenTALK** sessions recognized the lack in numbers of available counselors or other mental health professionals who could help students through tough times. Given the increase in the number of students in need of mental health supports and services as discussed earlier in this report, it is vital that schools have adequate staffing so that no student who needs intervention goes unserved.

### 3) Increased gun safety and gun control are needed to keep youth safe.

- Encourage parents and community members to safely store weapons and ammunition. One effective method to decrease the number of minors injured by guns and other weapons is to limit their access to them. When adults use gun locks, lock boxes or gun safes, and store ammunition in a separate area, young people have reduced access to weapons.
- Provide age-appropriate gun safety lessons for students. Making sure that young people understand the danger of handling guns is critical. Students should be taught not to pick up or play with guns. For younger students, helping them understand the difference between gun usage in movies and gaming, versus using guns in real life, is an important component of gun safety.

# 'It put a toll on me': Philadelphia students share impact of gun violence with Pa. attorney general

By Jeff Cole | Published August 4, 2023 5:40pm EDT | Crime & Public Safety | FOX 29 Philadelphia | ➔



## Philly students talk about impact of gun violence

Kids under the age of 18 make up about 10 percent of gun violence victims in Philadelphia. A group of Philadelphia school children spoke directly to Pennsylvania's attorney general Friday about their fears over continuing gun violence.

## CONCLUSION

The **teenTALK** Roundtables brought together diverse groups of student leaders from districts located across the Commonwealth. While the discussions focused on what students, parents and educators can do to prevent gun violence, action areas for broader audiences were also identified. Specifically, the students focused on three broad areas where improvement is needed:



23

### 1) **Student mental health services staffing:**

Students at all four sessions identified a lack of sufficient staffing in key positions such as guidance counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, school nurses, or other mental health personnel. The students indicated that they do not think there are enough experienced professionals in these positions to provide effective services to help all students in the building or to offer additional trained support to students in need. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA), a division of the American Counseling Association, recommends one school counselor to every 250 students. However, Pennsylvania's schools average only one counselor to every 343 students – falling well short of the ASCA's recommendation. Our government leaders at the state and local level should identify funding solutions to rectify this severe shortage in qualified mental health workers staffing our schools.

### 2) **Funding to support school climate programs, including but not limited to, those that address mental health, social emotional learning, and conflict resolution/peer mediation:**

The Pennsylvania School Safety and Security Committee, along with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, has made grant funding available annually for schools to address safety needs. Schools are encouraged to apply for this funding to enhance existing student mental health programs and other positive school environment and safety initiatives when the grant window opens for the 2024-25 school year.

### 3) **Passing and enforcing stronger gun legislation:**

Students described the deep pain of losing peers and the fear that more youth will experience trauma from gun violence in the near future unless legislative efforts are made to ban certain guns (e.g., assault weapons with high-capacity magazines and ghost guns) and limit access to individuals who pose a threat to themselves or others (i.e., "Red Flag" laws). The passage of these laws at the state and federal levels would go a long way to decrease gun violence among our youth.



Submitted Photo

Attorney General Michelle Henry on Wednesday spoke with Hazleton High School students about gun violence and how this affects them.

## AG talks with Hazleton students about gun violence, mental health

By Bill O'Boyle  
boboyle@timesleader.com

HAZLETON — At a roundtable meeting in Hazleton on Wednesday, Attorney General Michelle Henry said gun violence is an epidemic that affects the lives of Pennsylvanians every single day — and it impacts each community differently.

“Gun violence not only kills and leaves physical wounds, it also harms loved ones beneath the surface by impeding mental wellness,” Henry said. “I am here in Luzerne County to hear directly from these students about the damage violent incidents are causing them, their families, and their social circles.”

Wednesday’s roundtable was the latest in a series of meetings the Attorney General is having with students across the state, previously having met with students in Philadelphia, Allegheny, and Dauphin Counties.

AG Henry listened to

students as they shared experiences, along with feelings of frustration at having to adapt to regular occurrences of gun violence in their communities.

Henry said the goal of the roundtables is to work with students to create a report with recommendations on ways in which the Office of Attorney General, together with other policymakers and officials, can improve the mental health of young people in a world in which violence is reality.

In attendance at the roundtable were Hazleton Area School District Superintendent Dr. Brian Uplinger and Hazleton High School Principal Dr. Anthony Conston, along with other school officials and psychologists.

“On behalf of the Hazleton Area School District, I would like to thank Attorney General Michelle Henry for joining us in a crucial conversation about gun violence’s impact on student mental health,” Dr. Uplinger said. “Your presence today signifies

a shared commitment to creating both physical and mental spaces that are safer and more secure for our students. The Attorney General’s dedication to addressing this issue is deeply appreciated and will help create real solutions that prioritize the well-being of our school community. Working together, we can make a significant difference in the lives of our students.”

Hazleton High School students shared some of their personal experiences with gun violence and how those experiences make them fearful and stressed. They explained how it can be challenging to speak about these experiences because there is a fear of retaliation, it is a polarizing topic, and can be emotional.

The students also spoke about the negative influence that social media and traditional media has on young people and the need for better monitoring and regulation from adults.

Access to peer support

groups, a trained counselor, or trusted teacher can be therapeutic in processing incidents of violence, the students told AG Henry. They shared that it can be helpful when adults are proactive in addressing the issue, but the most important things are to establish trust, offer a variety of resources, and be accommodating to each individual’s needs.

The students were offered pamphlets about Safe 2 Say Something, an Office of Attorney General program that allows students to text message or use an app to report their concerns. Hazleton Area School District is one of many school districts participating in the Safe2Say Something program.

The students said they liked the format of Wednesday’s roundtable and are more comfortable sharing their feelings with small groups, so everyone can be heard.

Reach Bill O’Boyle at 570-991-6118 or on Twitter @TLBillOBoyle.



## CLOSING THOUGHTS

OAG's **teenTALK** Roundtables highlighted an array of areas where students, parents, teachers, and administrators can be both responsive and proactive to help reduce gun violence in our schools. Students worry about the possibility of gun violence occurring in their schools, and it is incumbent upon all of us to step up and do everything we can to put a stop to it.

25

To that end, this report is intended to be read actively. All stakeholders should use this report to inform our collective efforts to address the emotional and physical traumas and tolls of gun violence on our kids, and in our communities. Furthermore, we hope that the Pennsylvania General Assembly, the Governor, and members of our federal Congressional delegation will use this report in conjunction with OAG's Safe2Say Something report to produce meaningful legislative and administrative solutions to gun violence. An epidemic that affects every school in our Commonwealth deserves a statewide policy implementation.

Listening to our students, and then working together across all stakeholder levels to address their concerns, is required. Our youth have expressed fears about attending school in the face of gun access, gun violence, social media exposure, peer pressures, and mental health stresses. We must take action to hear their suggestions and apply their recommendations for a safer, healthier, supportive, education-focused school experience for our children.



The Attorney General would like to acknowledge  
the staff who helped produce this report:

- Michelle Nutter, Director of the Office of Public Engagement
- Kirsten Heine, Deputy Chief of Staff/Chief Counsel
- Donnajean Szukalski, Creative Director
- Jodi Lobel, Chief of Staff
- Jennifer Crandall, Communications Director
- Brett Hambright, Press Secretary



SEE IT. REPORT IT.



MOBILE APP



1-844-SAF2SAY



SAFE2SAYPA.ORG

Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General



**833-OAG-4YOU**

833-624-4968



**www.attorneygeneral.gov**



@PAAttorneyGen



PAAttorneyGen



PAAttorneyGen