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Senate of Pennsylvania

February 7, 2020

Governor Tom Wolf
508 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Wolf:

I recently received a letter from your office regarding student safety along with a copy of The 2018 Yearbook memorializing the 37 victims of school shootings nationwide. Please know that the heartbreaking stories included in this book have only strengthened my resolve to restore the egregious 75 percent cut you have proposed for the School Safety Grant program in this year's budget.

As you know, improving school safety has been a point of emphasis for lawmakers over the past two years. Together, we have made enormous strides toward ensuring a safer environment for young people to learn and grow.

I was proud to join my Republican colleague Senator Pat Browne and my Democrat colleague Senator Vince Hughes in authoring Act 44 of 2018, bipartisan legislation that created the School Safety and Security Grant Program and the Safe2Say Something anonymous school threat reporting system.

As a result of this law, schools across the state have received more than \$100 million in grants over the past two years to support the school safety initiatives they believe are best for their community, including hiring school police officers, school resource officers, counselors and/or mental health counselors; alternative education and diversion programs; violence prevention initiatives; school safety and emergency preparedness plans; physical upgrades to school buildings; and, equipment purchases to improve safety, such as metal detectors.

Additionally, the Safe2Say Something threat reporting system generated more than 40,000 tips that have helped law enforcement identify specific threats of violence and respond to students suffering with dangerous mental health issues.

The Senate Majority Policy Committee also held a series of hearings in late 2018 to gather input on school safety from numerous stakeholders including teachers, administrators, parents, law enforcement and others who share our concern for the health and welfare of young people. These hearings were instrumental in making improvements to Act 44, including a law I authored last year focusing additional efforts toward mental and behavioral health issues among students.

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Governor Tom Wolf RE: School Safety Grant Cuts

On May 2, 2019, you said the following about this program in a news release announcing the awarding of School Safety grants to schools:

“These grants are the mechanism we need to create local strategies that will increase safety for our children and our teachers and prevent violence in classrooms and communities across the commonwealth. Schools should be safe, secure places for our children to focus on their education and on preparing themselves for a lifetime of success, not another place we need to worry about sending our children. Awarding these grants to more than 200 schools means a safer Pennsylvania.”

The state budget you presented to lawmakers on Tuesday slashed funding for this grant program by \$45 million – a 75 percent cut. It is unfathomable to me that you would send a letter to lawmakers detailing the tragic impact of school shootings on the same day that you proposed a budget that walks back the progress we have made over the past two years to make our schools safer.

Given the circumstances and timing of this letter, it is hard to classify it as anything other than a brazen case of gross political hypocrisy. While I appreciate your stated desire to make our communities safer, it is important for you to understand that we cannot do so by cutting funding for a proven effective school safety program.

If your interest is truly in protecting young people – and I believe it is – then I strongly urge you to set political gamesmanship and partisanship aside, and continue to work with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to support commonsense strategies to reach that goal.

All parties understand the need for this funding, and all parties should understand its importance to school districts. This issue should not be a point of contention in budget negotiations, nor should it be used as a bargaining chip to win concessions on other budgetary issues. This funding is too important to be held hostage for other political demands.

I welcome a continued discussion about how we can reduce the risk of violence in our communities, particularly in our schools. However, the first and easiest step we can take to safeguard our schools against potential threats is by immediately reversing the wrong-headed and counterproductive policy of gutting one of the most effective school safety programs in the country.

I remain hopeful that you will immediately disavow your proposed 75 percent cut to one of the best tools our schools have to protect the lives of young people.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott F. Martin". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Scott F. Martin
Pennsylvania State Senator, 13th Senatorial District