

EDUCATION WEEK

Plenty on Security, Little on Guns at Federal School-Safety Session in Kentucky

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The Federal School Safety Commission heard some of the usual suggestions for combating school violence at a pair of roundtables and in a listening session in Lexington, Ky., Tuesday, including calls for expanded access to mental health services and school resource officers.

And it heard some that were a further afield, including a pitch from a think tank that expanding private school vouchers could help students stay safe. There was even a call from the state's GOP Gov. Matt Bevin to consider restricting children's access to cell phones.

The Bluegrass State has also seen its share of school violence this year. Marshall County High School, in Benton, Ky., was the site of a shooting in January. Two students were killed and 14 others were injured. ([More in Education Week's school shooting tracker.](#))

Before the general public was given a chance to speak to the commission on Tuesday, there were two policy roundtables, including one featuring Bevin.

Bevin suggested that school shootings are on the rise because of cultural factors, including violent video games and intense media coverage of school shootings. (Both are issues that Trump has asked the commission to look into.) The governor also argued that doctors may be overprescribing psychotropic drugs to children, which can lead to suicidal thoughts and potential shootings. That's an argument made by some conservative media, and by Oliver North, the incoming president of the National Rifle Association. Scientists, though, say there's no evidence of a link of such drugs to school shootings.

"We have millions of children now in America on these drugs in a society" that is also coping with increased screen time and "the celebration [of violence] in video games and in television shows," Bevin said. "There are sensitive young minds on psychotropic who are depressed and who might think and react differently."

Culture, "is the root cause," he said. "Securing the buildings. That's the Band-Aid."

Bevin also held up his cell phone and suggested that the government might want to consider age limits for the devices. He cited studies showing that students who get more screen time are likely to be violent, he said. He did not suggest a similar age limit for guns.

"We've taken cigarettes away from young people. We have limitations on when [young people] can be exposed to alcohol and drugs and things of this sort. ... We need to start being very intentional and thoughtful and data-driven when it comes to the impact of these devices in the hands of young people," he added.

But Tonette Walker, the wife of Gov. Scott Walker, R-Wis., who participated on the panel with Bevin, disagreed that cell phones are the problem. Instead, she said, schools must deal with "Adverse Childhood Experiences" or ACEs. She said her husband has asked all schools to train staff on trauma-informed care. And Wisconsin is working to hook troubled kids up with mentors, she said.

Candice McQueen, Tennessee's state schools chief, who also spoke on the roundtable, talked about how her state was able to create a new \$25 million fund to help every school conduct a baseline safety assessment and offer grants to help schools upgrade their security. The state is giving priority to schools that don't have a School Resource Officer, she said.

And Allen Solomon, the sheriff of Auglaize County, Ohio, who spoke during a subsequent roundtable, expressed skepticism about whether schools should arm teachers. He noted that even people training to become police officers will get to a firing range and "freeze at the silhouette." Asking a teacher to carry a weapon and defend their school may be "asking them to go out of their element," he said.

During the listening session, in which anyone in the community could come to advocate a point of view, there was a lot of talk about the need for greater access to mental health professionals and school resource officers. Only a few speakers mentioned gun control. None spoke emphatically in favor of arming teachers.

- Bryan Flachbart, a representative of the Kentucky Association of School Administrators, argued for increased access to mental health treatment and more school resource officers, including at the elementary school level.

"We believe strongly in the power of the relationships school resource officers have with students, not just at the high school level," he said. "It starts at the elementary school level where those relationships are formed and bonded."

- Nasim Mohammadzadeh, a student who is part of the non-profit Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence's student voice team, urged the commission to probe gun safety, mental health supports, and more.

"Recent events have made us feel like our schools are under siege," she said. "The conversation we are having about how to make school safer must include, but also get beyond, guns. We need to talk about school climate and the relationships students have to each other and to adults in the school as well as the norms, goals, and values that make a place where students from a range of backgrounds can love learning and feel safe, welcome, and loved."

- Josh Trosper, an assistant principal at Knox Central High School in Barboursville, Ky., talked about the need for more mental health services for schools, not just to cope with gun violence, but also with the opioid crisis.

"We must have trauma-informed care services in all Kentucky schools. Students are suffering in all corners of the state. Many have no way to release their frustration but through violence, drugs, and other inappropriate means," he said. "We have got to have access to qualified mental health professionals, including counselors."

- Corey Deangelis, a policy analyst for the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank, noted that school shootings are more apt to happen at public schools than private schools. He urged the

committee to consider expanding private school vouchers, a policy priority of U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who chairs the commission.

DeVos did not attend Tuesday's meeting. Neither did the other official members: Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, and Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen. Each sent a representative.

DeVos told Congress earlier this spring that gun rights are not part of the panel's purview. Her deputy, Mick Zais, who chaired the Kentucky session, later clarified that the panel will not be looking at "confiscating" existing weapons. He said the commission will explore "narrow" issues related to gun safety, including age limits for purchasing some firearms, and issues related to gun ownership and mental health.