

NEWS ALERT



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Homeland Security Committee

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, Chairman



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

“Protecting our Schools: Federal Efforts to Strengthen Community Preparedness and Response”

May 17, 2007 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Protecting our Schools: Federal Efforts to Strengthen Community Preparedness and Response”:

“I thank you all for joining us this morning as we explore the federal efforts available for our schools and their administrators when developing and implementing emergency preparedness and response plans. I would like to especially thank our witnesses for working with my staff as we periodically changed the hearing schedule.

The incident at Virginia Tech was just another reminder of the tragedies that children and students have faced in and around our nation’s schools. In March 1999, the tragedy at Columbine left over a dozen students and teachers dead. In September 2001, dozens of schools and over 6,000 children were evacuated from the area surrounding the World Trade Center. In October 2002, snipers struck fear in the hearts of D.C. area residents when they shot a Maryland boy as he stood outside of school. In September 2004, 186 children were killed and hundreds more wounded when terrorists attacked their school in Beslan, Russia.

Each of these tragedies reminds us that our schools remain vulnerable to direct and indirect attacks.

Today we will discuss the resources that are available to our schools and look for ways to bridge the communications gap between local and state school administrators and the federal government. Existing objective and anecdotal evidence suggests most American schools are not adequately prepared to respond to a serious crisis.

I have spent much time on this Committee working on school preparedness issues. Last year, I commissioned a survey as Ranking Member of the House Homeland Security Committee. I sent this survey to various schools and school districts within the 2nd District of Mississippi to determine the level of preparedness within the schools and to see how these respondents are relying on federal agencies – like the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Education – in making their plans.

Unfortunately, the results of the survey indicate that most of the schools in Mississippi

are doing the bulk of the work alone. The two major federal agencies designed to deal with this issue – DHS and Education – are not even considered ‘resources’ by school officials. Many of the respondents commented that they welcome a more proactive approach from the Department of Homeland Security in reaching out to schools and school districts as they develop their emergency plans.

Unfortunately, the Department has thus far failed to take a leadership role in school preparedness. Our Federal agencies can do better in coordinating school preparedness materials for our state and local governments.

I hope that after today’s hearing, officials from both Departments will work to create a comprehensive website that will serve as a one-stop shop for school administrators to use in planning for and responding to emergencies.

There is an abundance of resources available to state and local officials; up until now, these resources have been difficult to find. I think a well-publicized website will help solve some of those problems.

But I’m also deeply concerned about the priorities of this Administration when it comes to providing financial resources to help schools confront these problems. One must question the Administration’s priorities in light of the cuts that have been imposed on school preparedness funding across the country.

For two consecutive years in FY 06 and 07, President Bush has sought to eliminate all funding for the state grants portion of the Safe & Drug Free Schools Program. This program provides grants to state education agencies which they can distribute to local schools for things like metal detectors, security cameras, and training for campus security personnel.

The number of awards under the Emergency Response and Crisis Management Plans Discretionary Grants program has also dropped – from 134 awards in 2003 down to 100 awards in 2005.

We can’t keep doing this to our children. The Federal government can’t prevent these tragedies from occurring.

But we can help our schools plan better and prepare better. It’s the very least we can do.”

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