



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

James L. Seward

Seward: Keep Our Schools Safe

JAMES L. SEWARD

With the news daily reporting sexual abuse of students and school violence, it's important to be sure our state doesn't take a step back in protecting our school's students. That's why the senate has announced action on a comprehensive plan to enhance school safety and ensure the well-being of millions of children.

The senate's three-pronged plan includes: rejecting Governor Spitzer's proposal to remove school resource officers (SROs) from schools across the state; restoring funding for the state office that conducts criminal background checks on school employees; and the passage of omnibus legislation to combat the growing problem of child pornography, internet predators and the sexual exploitation of children.

The senate's budget will reject a plan by Governor Spitzer to remove 92 state troopers from more than 100 school districts across New York State. It will also restore budget cuts proposed by Governor Spitzer for the State Education Department's Office of School Personnel Review and Accountability, which performs background checks on prospective school employees.

The school resource officer program has saved children's lives and is a critical component of the senate's plan to ensure the safety and security of children across the state.

As a member of the Senate Education Committee, I was astounded the governor had cut money for investigating misconduct by school employees. If our priority is protecting children, then we must fund the investigation of abuse allegations and the presence of police in our schools.

We have been making tremendous strides against sexual deviants who prey on our children. We must continue to do whatever we can to make sure our children can live and play in a safe environment.

At a recent public hearing, the state police made a compelling case regarding the critical role SROs play in ensuring a safe learning environment, as well as in fighting crime in local communities. In just the current school year, state police SROs responded to more than 2500 criminal calls, made over 1000 arrests and confiscated nearly 100 illegal weapons.

As a result of information provided by students, an SRO was able to prevent a planned attack in one public school that was to coincide with a recent anniversary of the Columbine school shootings. In other cases, SROs have intervened to prevent more than 170 potential suicides, regularly acting as mentors to troubled students.

In 2000, the senate approved legislation that requires all prospective school employees be fingerprinted to undergo an FBI background check. The law required school districts to directly report to law enforcement all criminal allegations involving suspected abuse of a child by a school employee.

According to a 2007 State Education Department Report, the law has been effective, with nearly 1,400 applicants being denied clearance to work in a school setting after the criminal background check revealed they were unfit to work with children. The governor cut funding in the budget.

The senate will also pass the "Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Prevention Act of 2008," which would enact aggressive measures to protect children from the dangers posed by Internet predators, child pornography and child sexual abuse.

The comprehensive legislation will:

- > Toughen penalties for promoting child prostitution;
- > Increase penalties for producing child pornography;
- > Provide enhanced penalties where a sex crime against a child has been committed using a computer or computer service.

The Internet is a wonderful tool that has transformed and improved the lives of millions, but sexual predators have also made it a potentially dangerous weapon that can be used to victimize innocent children. By taking these sensible, aggressive steps we can better protect our kids, provide parents with greater peace of mind, and crack down on pornographers and predators who use computer technology to harm and exploit young children.

The bill (S.6747) now goes to the assembly.