

Securing Our Schools (Op-Ed)

September 22, 2003

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By Congressman Steve Rothman (D-NJ9)

Far too often Americans turn on the television or open up the newspaper and learn about yet another school shooting or fight. It has become a tragic reality that guns and other weapons are being brought into schools all across America. Children are forced to wonder whether they are safe in school -- a place once thought to be a guaranteed safe haven.

Whether it is fighting terrorism or working to keep our schools free of violence, I have always believed that government's first responsibility is to protect the people. Government has the responsibility to do everything possible to ensure that our children are safe and protected from violence of any kind in school. School violence is a real danger from New Jersey to California and everywhere in between, and, in my view, the federal government in particular has an obligation to help local municipalities and property taxpayers cover the cost of implementing new school safety initiatives.

That is why I was so proud to have authored a school safety law, the 'Secure Our Schools Act.' With bipartisan support, I was able to get it passed in Congress, signed into law, and then funded. The 'Secure Our Schools Act' provides municipalities with federal funds they need to help implement school security measures that will allow students to focus on their studies without having to look over their shoulders worrying that they are in danger. A secure school environment provides our youngsters with an educational environment free from unnecessary distractions, and full of opportunities to learn. When children know they are safe at school, they can fully focus on what is being taught in class, and thus excel with their schoolwork. I developed the 'Secure Our Schools Act' in direct response to concerns over school safety expressed to me by children, parents, and teachers from my Congressional District. They wrote to me asking for my help to keep students safe in their schools. As the father of two public school children myself, these letters touched me deeply.

Under the 'Secure Our Schools Act,' which is administered by the U.S. Department of Justice, interested municipalities can apply for matching federal grants to help provide safety measures and procedures for schools under their jurisdiction. The program is voluntary. It calls for the federal government to pay for half of the security measures, with the state or local government covering the remainder of the cost. Municipalities that can demonstrate financial need, can receive 100 percent of the security costs.

The 'Secure Our Schools Act' grants may be used to install metal detectors, locks, improved lighting, and other deterrent measures that will help keep students safe. Additionally, these monies can be used for school security assessments, security training of personnel and students, and for improved coordination with local law enforcement officials. With walkthrough metal detectors available for \$1,750 and handheld wand metal detectors available for \$145, just to name a few of the security measures that can be taken, significant progress can be made in preventing weapons from being brought into our schools, while saving local property taxpayers from bearing the full cost for these security initiatives.

For the past two years, the 'Secure Our Schools Act' has been a pilot program. As a member of the House Appropriations Committee I was able to get Congress to provide \$5 million per year for this program. In 2002, the first year of funding for the 'Secure Our Schools Act,' municipalities in 27 states were awarded grants. Six municipalities in New Jersey received grants for a total of \$615,000: Asbury Park -- \$50,000; Irvington -- \$50,000; North Bergen -- \$325,000; Orange - \$35,000; Union City - \$125,000; and Wildwood - \$30,000. Funding for 2003 will be announced later this year.

For Fiscal Year 2004, I am presently engaged in transforming this very successful pilot program - that has received overwhelming interest from so many municipalities from across the nation - into a broader, more permanent initiative. Once again, this effort will call upon the bipartisan support of my colleagues in the Congress. In particular, I will be working with the present House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner, Jr. (R-WI05) and Congressman Henry Hyde (R-IL6), the distinguished former Committee chairman who helped me pass my 'Secure Our Schools Act' in the first place. With the appropriations process nearly completed for Fiscal Year 2004, we are seeking \$20 million in federal funding - four times the current level.

I want to thank the League of Municipalities for allowing me to publish this article concerning the 'Secure Our Schools Act,' in order to allow me to further encourage all interested municipalities across New Jersey to apply for these important funds. I created this law in order to enhance the security for our nation's schoolchildren, and to spare local property taxpayers from the full costs of these prevention initiatives. It would be a shame and a tragic lost opportunity if New

Jersey municipalities who could benefit from this program did not apply for the federal money available through my 'Secure Our Schools Act.'

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[Go back](#)