

# **MISSISSIPPI SCHOOL SAFETY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS**



**JANUARY 2019**

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## BACKGROUND

In response to the continuous acts of violence and school shootings across the country, Governor Phil Bryant established the Mississippi School Safety Task Force in June 2018 to study school safety in Mississippi and examine the threats along with the very best methods of protection and response.

Unfortunately, the State of Mississippi is not immune to school shootings. On October 1, 1997, a mass shooting event occurred at Pearl High School. Two students were killed, and seven others were wounded. One person was killed off campus, bringing the total injured or killed that day to 10.

This year alone, more than a dozen threats have been made against Mississippi schools; there were two students shot at local universities; and a suspect was taken into custody after opening fire near Eupora High School. There have also been numerous school bomb threats statewide, along with other reported school safety incidents. Threats are often made that do not make the media, but our local school and law enforcement officials continue to respond with the resources they have available.



## **AUTHORITY**

The Mississippi School Safety Task Force was created by Governor Phil Bryant under Executive Order 1422 on June 19, 2018. The task force was charged with re-examining school safety and studying threats along with the very best methods of prevention and response.

The task force was comprised of the Commissioner of Public Safety, who served as Chairman, and other such members as the Governor deemed necessary. The members served voluntarily in an advisory capacity.

Members met periodically at the call of the Chairman to study school safety in Mississippi and develop a comprehensive report including making recommendations for improvement.

The Mississippi School Safety Task Force was tasked with providing the Governor a written report incorporating the directives of Executive Order 1422.

STATE OF MISSISSIPPI

Office of the Governor



EXECUTIVE ORDER 1422

**WHEREAS**, ensuring a safe school environment for students, teachers, and staff in Mississippi is of the utmost importance; and

**WHEREAS**, our schools have safety measures in place designed to prevent and respond to incidents. However, these measures should frequently be re-evaluated and updated in order to respond appropriately to evolving threats; and

**WHEREAS**, in light of the tragic school shootings that have taken place, we began the process of re-examining school safety in Mississippi with a series of discussions among stakeholders earlier this year; and

**WHEREAS**, it is necessary to continue the discussion and examination of school safety in Mississippi and formally assemble a group to study threats along with the very best methods of prevention and response.

**NOW, THEREFORE**, I, Phil Bryant, Governor of the State of Mississippi, pursuant to the authority vested in me under the Constitution and laws of the State of Mississippi, do hereby create the Mississippi School Safety Task Force.

**IT IS FURTHER ORDERED** that the Mississippi School Safety Task Force shall be composed of the Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Public Safety, who shall serve as the Chairman, and such other members that the Governor deems necessary. The members shall serve voluntarily in an advisory capacity.

**IT IS FURTHER ORDERED** the Mississippi School Safety Task Force shall meet periodically at the call of the Chairman to study school safety in Mississippi and develop a comprehensive report of our schools' current safety procedures in place and should address the potential threats in Mississippi schools; identify ways to prevent and mitigate these threats; evaluate our schools' current response efforts and resources; and make recommendations for improvement.

**IT IS FURTHER ORDERED** that the Mississippi School Safety Task Force shall provide to the Governor a written report incorporating the directives of this Executive Order.

**IN WITNESS WHEREOF**, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Great Seal of the State of Mississippi to be affixed.

**DONE** in the City of Jackson, on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of June in the year of our Lord, two thousand and eighteen, and of the independence of the United States of America, the two hundred and forty-second.

**PHIL BRYANT**  
GOVERNOR



**BY THE GOVERNOR**

**C. DELBERT HOSEMAN, JR.**  
SECRETARY OF STATE

# TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Marshall Fisher, Chairman	Commissioner, MS Department of Public Safety
Walter Armstrong	Chief, City of Natchez Police Department
Wendy Bailey	Chief of Staff, MS Department of Mental Health
Mark Baker	MS House of Representatives Chairman, Judiciary A Committee
Richard Bennett	MS House of Representatives Chairman, Education Committee
Averi Berry	Student Representative
Paul Chamblee	MS School Boards Association
John Dowdy	Director, MS Bureau of Narcotics
Colonel Chris Gillard	Director, MS Highway Patrol Asst. Commissioner, MS Department of Public Safety
K.C. Hamp	Sheriff, Tunica County
Vicki Helfrich	Executive Director, MS Wireless Communication Commission
Briggs Hopson	MS State Senate Chairman, Judiciary A Committee
Sergeant Al Kimbrell	School Resource Officer, Clinton Public Schools
JW Ledbetter	Director, MS Office of Homeland Security
Greg Michel	Executive Director, MS Emergency Management Agency
Diana Mikula	Executive Director, MS Department of Mental Health
John Neal	Chief, City of Ridgeland Police Department
Martin Pace	Sheriff, Warren County
Captain John Poulos	MS Highway Patrol
Pat Ross	Office of Governor Phil Bryant
Jay Smith	Superintendent, Long Beach School District
Joel Smith	District Attorney, Harrison County
Gray Tollison	MS State Senate Chairman, Education Committee
Dr. Bill Welch	MS Department of Education
Dr. Carey Wright	State Superintendent, MS Department of Education

# INTRODUCTION

Proactively protecting our students is one of the most essential components of their education. U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has said that there is no “one size fits all” approach to school safety because every school and community is different. This is especially true in Mississippi. Governor Phil Bryant recently stated, “protecting our schoolchildren as part of our overall mission to ensure public safety will remain my highest priority”.

It is important to look at what is working within our own schools and what others are doing to raise the bar. The task force studied recommendations currently proposed by other states, in addition to seeking solutions from internal and external stakeholders. Task force members were comprised of seasoned leaders throughout the state who share the common goal of protecting our children and educators.

Law enforcement officials, education and mental health professionals, along with members of the state legislature and other relevant stakeholders met regularly from June until November 2018. Discussions were held on school safety measures currently in place, along with the potential threats our schools are facing each day and analyzing our deficiencies. Identifying ways to prevent and mitigate these threats was a constant conversation, in addition to evaluating current response efforts and resources.

It was paramount to place a student representative on the task force so students would have a voice. The viewpoints shared by the student member were very insightful, and it brought a greater level of awareness to educating the other task force members. Additionally, task force members held a focus group in July 2018 to gather information from students around the state with different viewpoints on school safety. It was important to hear from these students at the beginning of the task force process because their opinions greatly matter. Various discussions were held throughout the day on the topics of mental health, school administration, law enforcement, and their opinions on school safety. The goal was to create a safe zone for everyone to speak freely and without judgement. It became apparent that safety was a concern of the students. Hearing their concerns and suggestions was very insightful and played a major role in formulating the recommendations.

Throughout the course of the meetings, the task force made a concerted effort to identify measures based on affordability. However, there are some that require substantial funding. It was determined that the recommendations requiring such, are critical to helping ensure that our students and teachers are better protected in an active shooter incident.

Training is a key component that will save lives, along with threat assessments being performed on a regular basis. Increasing the number of mental health professionals and properly trained school resource officers in schools is a key priority that cannot go unrecognized and unfunded. Having a secure and anonymous means of communication

for parents and students to address school safety issues is another vital resource that is necessary to identify threats in schools. Often, after school shootings and other violent incidents take place, the suspect was known to have shown questionable behaviors beforehand. People did not feel comfortable reporting information to school and local law enforcement authorities because they did not want to be referred to as a snitch – this mentality must change. As a result, discussions were held on what preventative measures and resources our schools have. Furthermore, law enforcement needs the proper resources available to arrest individuals who have made terroristic threats, in addition to having adequate preventative and investigative resources for social media monitoring, threat assessments and training.

The recommendations brought forth from this report are not to be taken as a final blueprint for addressing all the school safety needs in our state. However, these recommendations can help provide the framework for improving the safety of our schools. They should be used as a starting place to begin the conversation on increasing the number of mental health professionals in our schools, along with the number of trained school resource officers around the state. The roles that mental health professionals and school resource officers play in the safety of schools must not be taken lightly. Moreover, working relationships with law enforcement must also be identified and improved upon. Interagency coordination efforts by school officials and law enforcement are critical to the success of implementing universal communication plans that are necessary in times of duress.

We must remain vigilant and understand that adequate measures must be in place beforehand to respond successfully to active shooter attacks and other school safety issues. Proper training and education are key components for laying the foundation to maintain awareness between faculty and students who are generally on the first lines of an attack. One recommendation in this report does not trump another. They all equally play a role in implementing successful methods of prevention and response.





# TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

## EDUCATION

### RECOMMENDATION #1

***All school districts shall participate in creating a secure link on each school district's website for reporting school safety issues and threats of violence using a unilateral software platform that reports directly to the school district, local law enforcement agencies and the Mississippi Analysis and Information Center (MSAIC Fusion Center). The Department of Education will launch a statewide media and awareness campaign to educate on recognizing warning signs and indicators of possible mental health issues and/or dangerous behavior while encouraging anonymous/private good-faith reporting immune from repercussions.***

The Department of Public Safety, Office of Homeland Security should be utilized as the state reporting system to implement the secure electronic reporting platform as described above.

The Department of Education should prioritize and develop the described statewide media and awareness campaign.

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### RECOMMENDATION #2

***The Department of Education will enact mandatory requirements for all school districts to adopt evidence-based curriculum for social and emotional learning to provide students with skills to manage stress and anxiety. All school districts shall maintain a Crisis Response Team at each school with members required to complete advanced first aid and tourniquet training. A trauma/tourniquet kit shall be supplied to each school.***

The Department of Education should consider enacting mandatory requirements for all school districts to implement the new curriculum, and expand, train and equip Crisis Response Teams appropriately.

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### RECOMMENDATION #3

***Amend Mississippi Code Ann. Section 37-11-5 to require schools to develop and conduct an active shooter drill within the first 60 days of each new school semester for students and teachers/staff. In addition, require through the Department of***

***Education for all school district employees to attend Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events (CRASE) training annually. Enact a real-time alert system utilized in active shooter events.***

The Legislature should consider amending Section 37-11-5 to require schools to conduct an active shooter drill within the first 60 days of each new school semester.

The Department of Education should consider enacting a policy for all school district employees to attend Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events (CRASE) training annually.

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#### **RECOMMENDATION #4**

***A uniform threat assessment of each school campus shall be conducted before January 2020 by a certified entity approved by the Mississippi Office of Homeland Security in concert with local and county law enforcement and provided to the School Board within four weeks of completion. This assessment will include inspection/installation of surveillance equipment and building-specific floorplans, as well as other specific recommendations to improve safety. This information shall be provided to local law enforcement with room identifiers. Regular “walk-throughs” should be conducted by local law enforcement.***

The Legislature and the State Board of Education should consider revising applicable statutes and policies to ensure a uniform threat assessment is mandated before January 2020.

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#### **RECOMMENDATION #5**

***Establish a sustainable funding source for hiring one (1) school resource officer (SRO) per school campus with no less than one (1) school resource officer per 1000 students in every school unless the certifying entity for the threat assessment recommends otherwise. In the absence of funding to hire additional school resource officers, the school districts may establish a volunteer “school marshal program” provided they are certified according to standards set by a newly created state certification for school marshals through the Mississippi Board on Law Enforcement Officers’ Standards and Training with initial and mandatory annual refresher training in Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT).***

The Legislature should consider additional funding in the MCOPS program for additional grants to school resource officers. The Mississippi Board on Law Enforcement Officers’ Standards and Training should consider creating a state certification program for school marshals.

## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

### RECOMMENDATION #6

***Expand student access to local mental health resources with the development of statewide standardized Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between local Community Mental Health Centers or other Department of Mental Health certified mental health facilities, and school districts to include screening tool selection, referral procedures, and behavioral health screening/referral forms.***

The Department of Mental Health should work with certified mental health facilities and school districts to develop and execute standardized MOUs as described.

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### RECOMMENDATION #7

***Train appropriate school personnel to conduct initial behavioral health screenings of students experiencing or exhibiting behavioral stress or at risk of harming themselves or others.***

The Department of Education should consider enacting a statewide policy that requires appropriate school personnel be trained by the Department of Mental Health in conducting behavioral health screenings.

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### RECOMMENDATION #8

***Increase the number of school district employees (teachers, nurses, counselors and school resource officers) trained in Mental Health First Aid for Youth. Require a two-hour annual refresher course for all school district employees to include school resource officers on suicide prevention and mental health.***

The Department of Mental Health should utilize a recently-awarded Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) grant to train approximately 450 SROs in MHFA for Youth and 1,800 educators and school counselors in MHFA for Youth over the next three years.

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## PUBLIC SAFETY

### RECOMMENDATION #9

***Enact legislation addressing terroristic threats.***

The Department of Public Safety will propose the passage of a Mississippi Terroristic Threats Law during the 2019 Legislative session.

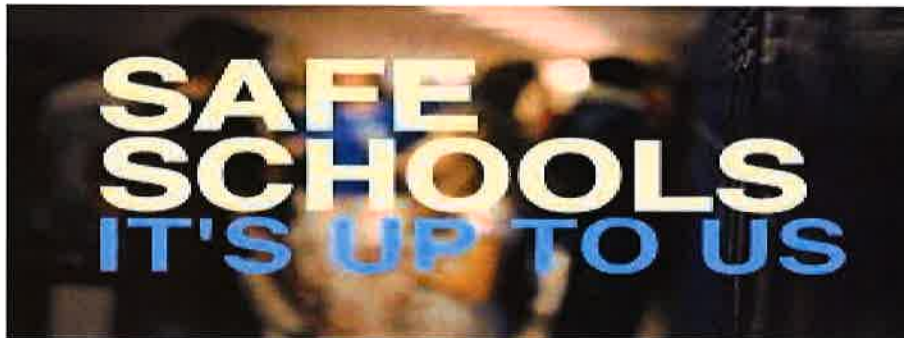
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### RECOMMENDATION #10

***Additional funding for the Mississippi Analysis and Information Center (MSAIC Fusion Center) to hire three new regional analysts dedicated to analyzing and resolving potential threats identified by the agency's statewide social media intelligence platform.***

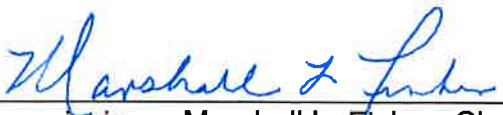
The Department of Public Safety should request funding from the Legislature to hire three new analysts dedicated to analysis and dissemination of school safety information.

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## **ADOPTION**

After due consideration, the Mississippi School Safety Task Force presents this report on January 7, 2019 and directs its chair to sign and deliver a copy of this report to Governor Phil Bryant.

  
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Commissioner Marshall L. Fisher, Chairman