

**TESTIMONY OF
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NORTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION
BEFORE THE 68th LEGISLATIVE SESSION
SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
JANUARY 27, 2023
IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 2016**

Chairman Sorvaag, members of the Senate Appropriations Education and Environment Committee Division, my name is Kirsten Baesler and I'm the Superintendent at the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. I am here today to testify in support of the Watch Center concept in Senate Bill 2016 because I believe we are operating on borrowed time. The threat of a mass school shooting and the potential cost in lives is too great to ignore, and we must take as many precautions as we can to avoid the worst tragedy many of us can imagine. A 24/7/365 watch center, while not a panacea, would greatly enhance school safety across the state.

It is a firmly held belief of the Department of Public Instruction that a 24/7 state watch center will benefit educational facilities across North Dakota in the numerous ways. First and foremost, without a 24/7 state operations center the FBI will not dual-notify when a threat to schools is discovered online by either the FBI or the social media companies themselves. Currently, they will notify the local law enforcement representative which may be sufficient in some locations in the state while allowing for too much risk in others. The watch center also provides after hours monitoring for existing tools that would otherwise send threat alerts to email inboxes that are unmonitored until the next work morning. That could prove disastrous as schools are already welcoming children into school before those emails get read. If this was the only problem the watch center solved, it would be enough for my recommendation. As one of the few states without a mass shooting, I truly believe that is just a matter of time before tragedy strikes here. If you are not moved by the potential savings of lives, consider the recent class action lawsuits against schools and others after mass shootings. In Uvalde alone, the class action lawsuit against the city, school district, law enforcement agencies and individual officers is \$27 billion. The cost of inaction is too high.

Going beyond the reasons listed above, there are other ways a watch center can help to keep our schools safe. When incidents occur near schools but do not directly impact them, there is often no notification to school officials of a nearby threat. Such situations could be a hazardous materials incident or protests, for example. With proper warning, schools can take actions sooner and/or seek advice from state leadership on best practices. An additional way that the watch center can assist states is by coordinating the information sharing when hoax threats occur. There have been numerous fake bomb and active shooter threats called in around the country and in North Dakota. When received without context a school may be more likely to take measures that are incommensurate with the actual threat. The NDSLIC and watch center would fill that vacuum 24/7, including putting out information overnight when threats start rather than beginning the next day during "business hours." Finally, an underrated benefit of the watch center and the technologies it would leverage is the ability to identify and notify of vulnerabilities to school networks or infrastructure. A recent example included the identification of vulnerable HVAC systems at a school that the watch center was able to alert the school to.

Although not specific to schools, there is additional value to having a centralized coordination point for rapid response synchronization and pre-staging in the event of a major incident. Most of the schools in the state are not located in jurisdictions with adequate emergency medical services, hospital rooms, search and rescue, or first responders in general to handle a major incident at a school in session. An active watch center will ensure that no time is wasted in organizing state resources, mutual aid, and public information assistance. The watch center can also help to provide the necessary information to make informed decisions about school closures or delayed openings after storms. I also believe there is opportunity to provide a statewide suspicious activity reporting platform that has long eluded our most rural areas due to the lack of consistent 24/7 monitoring capability.

In conclusion, I strongly recommend the establishment of a 24/7 state emergency watch center. This center would provide a vital service to educational facilities, ensuring the safety and well-being of all students, staff, and faculty in times of crisis. The center would provide immediate access to emergency assistance, better coordinate response efforts with local authorities, and organize support for disaster recovery. By investing in a 24/7 state emergency watch center, we can ensure that our educational facilities are more prepared to both prevent and respond to emergencies, better protecting the lives and well-being of all individuals in schools across North Dakota. I thank you for your support and the opportunity to testify before the committee today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.