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Remarks to the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Advisory Committee

Mike Herrmann, Executive Director

Office of School Health, Safety and Learning Support

Tennessee Department of Education

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Mr. Chairman and members of the advisory committee; thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you regarding the State Grants portion of the Safe and Drug-free Schools and Communities Program.

Our time is limited so let me get right to the heart of what I would like to share with you. I've tried to align my comments with the questions that the Committee has been asked to address relative to the State Grants Program.

Strengths

In terms of the strengths of the program:

First, the State Grants program is the only source of funding for alcohol and drug education and violence prevention that reaches into virtually every school district in our state. Without the State Grants program in Tennessee, the overwhelming majority of our schools simply would not address these two extremely important issues in any systematic or ongoing way.

Second, and equally important, the State Grants program provides an infrastructure, at both the state and local level, for school-based policy and practice in these vitally important areas. When Tennessee began a major methamphetamine initiative last year, this infrastructure enabled us to reach the education community and those that could make things happen quickly and efficiently. More recently the Governor's Office of Homeland Security wanted to enhance the security and preparedness of our schools. The training and strategies and the people were built upon the work and organization established by the State Grants program.

Last November this infrastructure, including the relationships that have been built between our state department and the U.S. Department of Education, were particularly important when one of our students shot three administrators, killing one. As a result of the relationships and resources already in place, we were able to move quickly to support the district in restoring a shattered learning environment.

The State Grants program is the only universal funding stream that addresses some of our most significant barriers to learning. The ability of students to learn and teachers to teach is directly related to the safety and order of our schools and the health and well-being of our students. When administered with vigor and strong leadership, this program is as much a school improvement strategy as it is a drug and violence prevention program.

Challenges

The State Grants program certainly has its share of challenges. Most notorious of which is undoubtedly the difficulty we have in demonstrating effectiveness.

Because each local program is different, it's almost impossible to develop a universal set of outcome indicators. Most of our local managers are educators – not evaluators.

The small amount of funding most districts receive is frequently cited as being too little to implement research-proven programs. I would submit that there are many very effective strategies and/or activities that actually cost very little to implement. The real challenge with small amounts of funding is that the program manager at the local level probably doesn't have the time or training to carry out some of the more complex tasks deemed necessary to document effectiveness.

Another challenge is one of perception. Is this a school safety or an alcohol and drug program? And too often in education or government circles, we perceive importance and funding to be one and the same. As a result, state and local program managers must be particularly strong if they're going to be heard.

Effectiveness

So, is the States Grants Program effective in promoting safe and drug-free schools? In our state I certainly think so. Our most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey data indicates consistent and significant declines in almost every category of drug usage. The number of guns found in our schools has declined every year for the past 7 years.

By using our discretionary funds to cover out-of-pocket expenses associated with the implementation of important programs, over 1,200 of our schools have implemented Life Skills, Second Step or Olweus programs. 3 of our 4 urban school districts have long-running student assistance programs that have been able to use State Grants funds to leverage strong fiscal support from their communities.

A lot of work has gone into developing the specific indicators that will be a part of the Uniform Management Information System. The adoption of those measures will be invaluable in allowing us to compare apples to apples across districts and states, and to draw attention to the extent of our challenge. However, I'm afraid that they will be of limited value in demonstrating effectiveness.

It would be nice to be able to document reductions in 30-day drug use or positive changes in school climate at the building level; however, with funding that hovers in the \$5/student range that is simply not a realistic expectation and probably not a very good use of limited staffing at the local level.

A more practical and productive option would be to identify specific strategies that we know from research and experience are tied to the outcomes we desire. To a certain extent many of those elements are already built into the legislation. We can support and document the adoption of research-proven practices, particularly when federal and state resources are directed toward developing those skill sets in local program managers.

I think one of the most important items this committee can look at is how to transfer what is learned from research and more fully-funded national programs to the manager at the system and building level. So much of what is needed is not dependent upon funding, but rather upon changes in policy and practice. Action is more important than programs.

Program structure

In terms of the structure of the State Grants Program, I think it's important to make funding available to every school district as it is now, but across the board we need to be more prescriptive and firm about how the program is administered. This might mean that some districts or states would choose not to participate.

At the same time, we must provide a strong network of training and support to all schools, including those who choose not to pursue funding. This could entail both federal and state-level resources. This will require additional flexibility for states in awarding funds including the ability to set aside a larger proportion of funding for statewide initiatives.

Emergency management issues

Our schools have been significantly impacted by events like the terrorist attacks of September 11 and Hurricane Katrina. Much of the basic planning and response procedures that were followed in these events had previously been developed as a result of the series of school shootings that began ten years ago. One important change is that we now realize the important role that schools can and should play in the overall community response process. Public information, emergency sheltering, feeding and transportation are tasks that schools are uniquely prepared to provide.

In order for the education community to be a full player in these processes it is important that we build an infrastructure that includes federal, state and local participation. The State Grants Program can and should be an important building block for that infrastructure.

In Tennessee, I serve as one of two Department of Education Emergency Services Coordinators who can be activated by the Governor to serve at the State's Emergency Operations Center in the event of a major disaster. Over the past several years, SDFS

State Grants funds have been combined with Homeland Security funding to provide emergency management training to hundreds of schools and first responder teams.

Closing

To a large extent, I think many of the questions that will be raised today come down to a question of will. Do we have the will – particularly at the federal and state level – to make this program work? I know that everyone sitting on this panel can provide you with examples of districts that are doing outstanding work with very limited funding. We can hold everyone to those higher standards if we simultaneously provide leadership and support.

The last several years have been difficult for the State Grants program. No Child Left Behind, major budget cuts and an ongoing threat of elimination have been difficult to weather. But despite it all we still have an experienced and committed cadre of folks out there ready to do what needs to be done. They deserve a long-term commitment. I encourage you to recognize the important role that the State Grants program must play if we are serious in our commitment to safe and drug-free schools and communities.