



Joseph K. Leibham

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 26TH DISTRICT

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Testimony on Assembly Bill 171

Senate Committee on Judiciary, Consumer Affairs, and Campaign Finance Reform

Thank you Chairman George and Committee Members,

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on Assembly Bill 171. This bill is a creative response to a growing number of unfortunate occurrences that are causing havoc in education institutions and public buildings across our state and on our families and our young children – bomb threats, bomb scares, and the possession or discharge of a firearm on school grounds.

School districts and public buildings across our state have been plagued with these threats of violence and disruption over the past number of years: Sheboygan, Sheboygan Falls, Janesville, Madison, Oak Creek, Ozaukee, South Milwaukee, Green Bay, Kettle Moraine, Racine County, Waterford, Waushara County, Waukesha County. Just to name a few.

Hundreds of thousands of dollars are being spent and worse yet, thousands of our state's young students and their families are being subjected to the frightening situations and the loss of valuable school time.

The Sheboygan Area School District, located in the district I have had the honor of representing, has been especially hit hard over the past number of years.

We have experienced close to 25 separate bomb threats – both our high schools, all three of our middle schools and three of our elementary schools have been the target of such scares. Over 6000 students, more than half of our entire district population, have had their lives directly impacted. Our school district has spent tens of thousands of dollars for additional security measures. Further thousands of administrative and teaching time has been used for building searches and providing additional security measures.

Even more disappointing, then these numbers are the facts about who is committing these crimes and why.

Typically, the students are high school age or younger. In Sheboygan, one of the girls being charged is only twelve years old. Asked why they do what they do, and the answers are a frustrating – "It was just a joke," "I wanted to cause some excitement," "I hadn't finished my class paper and this was a way to not suffer the consequences,"

Bomb threats, bomb scares and the possession or discharge of a firearm on school grounds are not a joke. Neither should be the consequences.

Assembly Bill 171 drives that point home by punishing these individuals with a penalty that will make a difference.

Under the bill, any individual who is convicted, or juvenile adjudicated, of a bomb scare involving the threatened destruction of a school or public building, or possession or discharge of a weapon while on school grounds will face a suspension of their driving operators privilege for two years. Young individuals, who have not yet received their driving license, will not be able to receive their license until the age of 18.

This mandatory suspension will not replace the potential of a felony conviction, jail time or a fine. The mandatory suspension will be above and beyond any determined punishment by the court or school.

Why target the driving privilege, you may ask. Because the suspension of a driver's license is perhaps the most impactful penalty we can place against the individuals who choose to become involved in threats of violence against our schools.

Ask kids today what is the worst punishment they can receive and the majority will say take away my driver's license or phone.

Unfortunately, a penalty of a felony or a fine simply does not seem to be having an impact in our society. Perhaps we have become numb to these consequences. We must become creative and smart in finding consequences that will make our young people think twice. The suspension of driving privileges for threats of violence against our schools and public buildings will really hit home.

Hit home not only as a penalty, but hopefully and even more importantly as a deterrent.

Our schools should be wholesome learning environments, not environments of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. AB 171 provides an appropriate, inexpensive and meaningful penalty for those who choose to participate in acts of violence against our schools and hopefully, an even stronger deterrent against becoming involved in these situations in the first place.

I would like to thank the constituent in my district and the officials of Sheboygan Area School District who asked me to bring the bill forward.

AB 171 passed the Assembly on May 8, 2001 on a bipartisan 71-27 vote. It has the endorsement of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the Chiefs of Police Association, and the Wisconsin Professional Police Association.

Thank you for your time and attention, Mr. Chairman and Committee Members. I would be happy to answer any questions on this important, common sense bill.