

Newtown Testimony: “The Power of this
Generation”:
A Connecticut Response

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AND

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Newtown High School @ 6:00

Mr. Speaker, Senator Williams, Senator McKinney, Representative Aresimowicz, Representative Cafero and Members of the Task Force on Gun Violence and Children's Safety. While the focus has rightfully focused on a plethora of different perspectives, it seems that one group has been habitually ignored: that of students. Coming from opposite ends of the political spectrum, my friend John Board and I strove to craft a compromise based on the belief that change must occur if Connecticut students—and Americans in general—are to remain safe from gun violence. The testimony that you are about to hear was put together in a bipartisan manner over the course of a week; we have decided to split up the testimony in that John is responsible for speaking on school safety concerns and I am responsible for mental health and gun safety issues.

Over the past several days of testimony there have been many valid ideas when it comes to School Safety ranging from Senator Boucher's suggestion of panic buttons for teachers to improving and revamping our school safety drills- such as fire, lockdown, chemical, etc. -Our schools have become way too structured, these drills should occur at any time including during passing times in between classes and when there are others less structured points in the day. The issue of metal detectors in school should be determined at the local board of education level.

School faculty and staff are an important resource for all students. School Resource Officers [SROs] can provide the needed 'connection' which students need by using; for instance using a program which such as the one I experienced during my high school tenure. it is called "Advisory" in which a block of time (20-40 minutes every cycle-which was seven days) in which students and teachers interacted, talk freely about whatever was on our minds, if it was a school centered issue or how the latest NFL game went. This program highlights the importance of a free-flowing dialogue in the school. Schools have never intended to be prisons; Schools are institutions of learning where the free-flow of ideas is not encouraged but expected.

I'm proud to be a founding member of an organization called SAID (Students Against Internet Discrimination) which is focused on cyberbullying in school communities. SAID has received the endorsement of several notable public figures on a bipartisan basis. I firmly believe that bullying is one of the central issues with our education system, that we need to address and fix. The solution, which I wish to propose, is that this General Assembly and the Connecticut Board of Education endorses and passes the "National School Climate Standards". It is not only costing lives but having a huge economic impact; interpersonal violence in our nation alone costs more than \$300 Billion per year, also in 2005 5,686 people between the ages of 10-24 were murdered, an average of 16 people a day. This is not only unacceptable on a moral but also an economic basis, we can't allow or afford either.

The National School Climate Council and many other school boards and community leaders created these standards; the framework is made up of five principles and a set of indicators and sub-indicators that support the school community:

1. Developing a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.
2. Developing policies that promote social, emotional ethical, civic and intellectual learning as well as systems that address barriers to learning.
3. Promoting practices that promote the learning and positive social, emotional, ethical and civic development of students and student engagement as well as addressing barriers to learning.
4. Creating an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.
5. Developing meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.

To clearly show the effects which bullying has on a person, I have included a short description of a demonstration, which is highly effective: A teacher in New York City told her students to take out a piece of paper and simply put it in on their desks. She then instructed them, to crumple it, stomp on it—really mess it up—but do not rip it. Then she had them unfold the paper, smooth it out and looked how scarred and dirty it was. Students were then told to say sorry to it. They found that no matter how much they said sorry and tried to fix the paper, the students found that scars are left behind. This is same when a person targets another person. The perpetrator may say that his is sorry, but the scars are there forever. Words do hurt. Actions do hurt. When the teacher concluded the demonstration she saw the looks on the students' faces; she knew the message hit home.

My former high school, Joel Barlow High School in Redding sufficient safety precaution, when it comes to access control, in place to try to prevent something like this ever happening on that campus. This school has buzz-in doors; a security staff that constantly monitors a 'sign-in' desk for every person who enters the building. Phones also should be by the 'lockdown' areas in classroom in case they are ever needed. There is also a moderate walk one needs to take between the parking lot and the main entrance of the school. Some people have talked about then 'need' to bulletproof glass. In this manner of bipartisanship I do see I need to bulletproof doors, and make the shades that we have on windows easier to operate.

A touchy subject in the whole scheme of any reform is use of I.D Cards, and their place in our education system. At this point, there should be a requirement that all members of the school body should have their I.D. on hand at all times. Also when visitors come to the school they should be issued a temporary pass, which they need to return at the end of their visit, thus being 'checked out'. Essentially all educational institutions should follow the guiding principle that each student is able to pursue their studies in a safe environment or, to quote Senator Boucher, "When a parent sends their child to school, they expect them to be safe."

Over the course of my schooling, I was a student who was enrolled in a special education program, due to my hearing loss. Students who are involved, to any degree, in a special education program need support. By this I am advocating several important precautionary meetings; mandating the in frequency of the PPTs (Planning and Placement Team) for students who are deemed by members of the professional counseling staff at a school that a student is at risk to themselves or others. Also for students to become more involved in the process of building their 504/IEP (Individualized Education Program) plans, if students have an understanding of whatever condition they have it may serve as a preventive measure. As a result, we can look at this from an economic impact and say that our schools need to increase the number of councilors available to our students.

As we have learned from the natural disasters during the past several years communication is essential. Schools need to implement the ability for the school's administration to send out text message and continue reverse emergency phone calls.

The State Department of Education should study and evaluate the safety mechanisms that are currently in place at each one of our K-12 institutions and provide clear and thoughtful recommendations. At the end of the evaluation process each school shall be given a grade equal to its accomplishments and a set of recommendations. We also have to involve our Students in decisions that are made. This means going to the student's representatives, the various Student Government Associations (SGAs) at our college campuses.

Many Americans have recently been taking part in meaningful discussions about the state of our mental health care system, both in Connecticut and in the United States, as a whole. While these discussions are long overdue, we must take into consideration their limitations; studies have shown that increasing mental health opportunities alone cannot be the only avenue to cut down on gun violence. Less than 5% of violent crime is actually committed by a person with a mental illness.

Still, there are ways that updating the way we handle cases of mental illness can help prevent some violent crimes. Some states have proposed expanding publicly-funded mental health services. Others have proposed other changes: just as doctors can notify the DMV if they believe someone should be unable to drive, shouldn't the same apply to guns, as long as certain privacy safeguards are ensured?

The waiting period to purchase a firearm after one has been released from a mental hospital should be extended to a minimum of at least 36 months. After that time period, with medical exam should be required, with a relevant medical health professional signing each patient off. Further, gun sellers should be able to request a background check to see if a prospective buyer has attempted suicide in the past five years.

After the massacre at Virginia Tech, a national background check database was created and states were encouraged to submit mental health records. We also urge Connecticut, as well as surrounding states, to submit as many records as possible. We both stand behind this aspect of Senator Looney's proposal: the creation of a gun offender registry in Connecticut.

However, as we discuss mental health, it is essential to discuss how we treat our mentally ill. Many advocates argue that a discussion about the social treatment of the mentally ill would be more beneficial. It would be wrong to ignore the enormous social pressures that many people living day-to-day with these mental conditions still face. Treating our mentally ill brothers and sisters with the same respect we would anyone else, while simultaneously providing them the services they need to lead a life of normalcy, must be a priority.

We strongly urge Connecticut to pass its own version of U.S. Senator Feinstein's assault weapons ban. Average citizens do not require military-grade weaponry to defend themselves or to hunt. Furthermore, magazine capacities should be capped at 7-10 bullets.

We see no reason that people who are unable to legally purchase guns should be able to legally purchase ammunition, as is the current state of the market. A gun permit should be required when buying any amount of ammunition. Proof of a recent mental health evaluation should be included on each gun permit. The simple regulation of ammunition is a common sense measure to help crack down on illegal use of weapons. We endorse U.S. Senator Blumenthal's Ammunition Background Check Act of 2013.

It is also time that measures be taken as an incentive against the stockpiling of ammunition; we propose a graduated tax on purchases of multiple boxes of ammunition. The first two boxes would be non-taxable, but, purchasing more than that would have incrementally higher taxes starting at a minimum of 15% and scaling up to 50%. We believe this to be a good starting point, if not a fix all solution. We believe in Senator Bye's so-called "Ammunition Tax" bill, but see this as a viable, bipartisan compromise.

No of Boxes:	Tax Rate (excluding standard sales tax):
0-2	0%
3-4	15%
4-5	24%
6-7	33%
8-9	42%
10+	50%

Last, we wholeheartedly support universal background checks for all gun sales. This includes, but is not limited to, ending the so-called "gun show loophole," where unlicensed people can sell guns without running a background check on the purchaser. This technicality makes no sense and ending it would have no ill side effects for citizens who are legally allowed to own a firearm. Furthermore, those who sell firearms for a living should be held up-to-date with State and Federal requirements.

The Power of Choices is what will define our generation; we will have to live with the ramifications of our actions that we take now. The solutions, which this Task Force recommends to the General Assembly, will forever impact not just our state but also our nation. We only have one chance to project ourselves as a leader on these critical issues and to set an example for other states. For even though we may differ on many other issues; we are convinced that the success of any proposed legislation must be bipartisan in nature and that over everything else Newtown is able to this. This call for action is not a liberal or conservative Call for Action. It is an American call for action; to bend the arc of justice towards a brighter and safer future for all Nutmeggers. I want to leave you with a quote from Congresswoman Esty: "The depth of their grief is a reflection of the depth of the love this community has. It's a very special place."

With that, thank you and we are open to any questions and comments the Task Force may have.

