

Testimony of Tara Williams
before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee in support of
**L.D. 477 “Resolve, Directing the Department of Education, Maine School Safety Center to
Convene a Stakeholder Group to Develop Best Practices for Lockdown Drills and Allowing
Parents to Opt Out of Lockdown Drills for Their Children”**

March 21, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Tara Williams and I am a resident of Cumberland and a mom of two children, one in elementary school and one in middle school.

I support LD 477, because it is very important that we understand the research associated with school lockdowns and active shooter drills, as well as the impact on Maine’s children and youth. I encourage you to support the convening of a stakeholder group to explore this issue further.

We need to plan together and implement best practices for drills to minimize traumatic impact on students and staff. I believe strongly that all staff need to be trained in their SAU’s emergency plan. That was important to me when I was a teacher. I also believe strongly that students do not need to be part of any active shooter aspects of emergency drills. I saw the detrimental impacts when I was a teacher and see them even more acutely as a mom.

Students, educators, and staff have experienced distress and sometimes lasting trauma because of active shooter drills. This is why I support the second section of this proposal, to allow parents to opt out their children from these drills. My local school district adopted the ALICE program this past year. I asked to opt my children out and my request was granted. Then my middle schooler came home and told me she would feel left out. She didn’t want to be singled out and asked me if it was okay if she participated. I went against my better judgement and opted her back in.

She came home after that first day of ALICE practice and had a lot to say, starting with, *“You were right.”* ... and I don’t hear that phrase often these days. My 7th grader continued, *“That scared me. It scared my friends. Everyone looked freaked out. They had wide eyes, and some were near tears. Mom, they taught us to throw a chair at an attacker, to throw anything, that the shooter won’t expect violence from the children and it will disrupt their aim. They taught us to block our door and how to run down the hall and escape if the shooter is in a different hallway. What are we being trained for? To be soldiers? Why do we have to learn how to fight an active shooter?”*

I don’t know how to answer that question... so, I turn to this committee and all Maine legislators to think about my child’s question. Is that how we want to focus on gun safety and preventing gun violence in Maine, through children learning how to hide from and fight people with guns? Please think about this... Do any potential, but unproven, benefits of active shooter and lockdown drills outweigh the well-documented and damaging consequences to our children’s wellbeing?

Study: Active Shooter Drills Could Further Increase Depression, Stress, Anxiety for Months

<https://momsdemandaction.org/new-study-active-shooter-drills-could-further-increase-depression-stress-anxiety-for-months/>

Georgia Tech and Everytown Researchers Analyzed Nearly 28 Million Social Media Posts Before and After Active Shooter Drills; Research Suggests that the Cost of Active-Shooter Drills May Outweigh their Benefits

- Active shooter drills in schools are associated with **increases in depression**, as evidenced by a statistically significant increase in posts with words like *therapy, cope, irritability, suicidal, and more*;
- Active shooter drills in schools are associated with **increases in stress and anxiety**, as evidenced by a statistically significant increase in posts with words like *afraid, struggling, and nervous and more*;
- These trends were **sustained at least 90 days** following drills and spanned diverse school districts across the country and a wide variety of drill tactics.

I can tell you personally, just as an educator, we were not okay [after drills]. We were in bathrooms crying, shaking, not sleeping for months. The consensus from my friends and peers is that we are not okay.” K–12 teacher

Report: Unannounced Active Shooter Drills Have No Place in Our Schools

<https://momsdemandaction.org/new-report-unannounced-active-shooter-drills-have-no-place-in-our-schools/>

Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, American Federation of Teachers, and National Education Association Release Recommendations on Active Shooter Drills and Proactive School Safety Solutions

Companies like ALICE Training Institute Promote Extreme Drills That Are Not Supported by Research

“My kindergartener was stuck in the bathroom, alone, during a drill and spent a year in therapy for extreme anxiety. in a new school even, she still has to use the bathroom in the nurses office because she has ptsd from that event.” K-12 Parent

Student-Involved Shooter Drills Cause Harm to Entire School Communities

<https://everytownresearch.org/report/how-to-stop-shootings-and-gun-violence-in-schools/>

In response to concerns about school shootings, many schools elect or are required to perform school shooter drills. These drills typically require students and school staff to go into lockdown and to practice specific emergency procedures, which often include staying quiet, locking the door, and turning off lights.

Since the 1999 Columbine shooting, active shooter drills have proliferated in America’s schools, with school-based shooting drills currently required in at least 40 states.¹⁰² But state statutes on this type of drill are often vague and leave the content and identification of who participates

up to school administrators. As a result, drills vary dramatically across schools, from some that involve advance parental notification of trauma-sensitive, developmentally appropriate exercises, to others that do not notify parents in advance, deploy “masked gunmen” actors, simulate gunfire, require students as young as three and four years old to be confined in a space for long periods, and fail to inform children that they are in a drill until it is over.¹⁰³

Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA support trauma-informed training for school staff on how to respond to active shooter situations, with instruction in such areas as lockout and evacuation procedures and emergency medical training. However, almost no research affirms the value of school shooter drills involving students for either preventing school shootings or protecting the school community when shootings do occur.¹⁰⁴ And while the proof of their effectiveness is limited, evidence is mounting on their harm to entire school communities.

In order to examine these concerns using scientific methods, Everytown partnered with the Georgia Institute of Technology’s Social Dynamics and Wellbeing Lab to study the immediate and long-term impacts of active shooter drills on the health and well-being of students, teachers, and parents. Study of activity in over 100 K–12 schools found that school shooter drills can lead to alarming and sustained increases in depression, stress, anxiety, and fear of death among students, parents, and educators.¹⁰⁵

Further, school drills with students may be ineffective because the preparedness procedures are being shared with the very individuals most likely to perpetrate a school shooting: former and current students. Therefore, while training for teachers and staff on how to respond to an active shooter threat is essential, our organizations do not recommend training for students as a preventative measure.

Even relatively tame active shooter drills with plenty of warning can traumatize students, critics say, raising the question of whether schools should do them at all. “Children are much more likely to be abused by a parent than shot at school, to be in a car accident, to be screamed at by a teacher. We don’t practice that,” said Joy Levinson, a New York City-based clinical psychologist who has had elementary-age clients tell her they wet their pants in class because drills made them afraid to go down the hall to the bathroom. “It causes school to feel unsafe, like a place we can’t learn,” she said. “That’s what schools are for.”

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/active-shooter-drills-are-scaring-kids-may-not-protect-them-n992941?fbclid=IwAR02iVR-Hy-E3hMrcTdvL9XL1ZSdpgSrbx1mZOdeo4QV2kx1bsX3pglrJul>

Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/systems-level-prevention/best-practice-considerations-for-armed-assailant-drills-in-schools>

The National Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of School Resource Officers, and Safe and Sound Schools have partnered to provide updated guidance on *Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools*. The author organizations represent key stakeholders in school safety and crisis planning, preparedness, and implementation. We are committed to supporting school communities’ understanding and implementation of best practices related to this work.

DEVELOPMENTAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

1. The threat perceptions of children are typically based on adult behavior, so effective drills include the presence of staff who inspire calm and confidence in students.
2. It is critical that participation in drills be appropriate to developmental level and physical abilities, and take into consideration prior traumatic experiences, special needs, and temperaments.
3. School-employed mental health professionals should be involved in every stage of preparation.
 - *Prior to the drill*, staff should be trained to recognize common trauma reactions.
 - *During the drill*, adults should monitor participants and remove anyone exhibiting signs of trauma.
 - *After completion of the drill*, staff and students should have access to mental health support.
4. Participation should never be mandatory, parental consent should always be obtained, and alternative methods to teach skills should be provided.

"[After drills, kids] think a villain is coming to school and wonder when it's happening, not if it's happening." K-12 parent

How To Stop Shootings and Gun Violence in Schools: A Plan to Keep Students Safe

<https://everytownresearch.org/report/how-to-stop-shootings-and-gun-violence-in-schools/>

Key recommendations of this report are as follows:

1. **Enact and Enforce Secure Firearm Storage Laws**
2. **Pass Extreme Risk Laws**
3. **Raise the Age to Purchase Semi-automatic Firearms**
4. **Require Background Checks on All Gun Sales**
5. **Foster a Safe and Trusting School Climate**
6. **Build a Culture of Secure Gun Storage (Be SMART program, parent education)**
7. **Create Evidence-Based Crisis Assessment/Prevention Programs in Schools**
8. **Implement Expert-Endorsed School Security Upgrades: Entry Control and Locks**
9. **Initiate Trauma-Informed Emergency Planning (training for staff)**
10. **Avoid Practices That Can Cause Harm and Traumatize Students**

1. ENACT AND ENFORCE SECURE FIREARM STORAGE LAWS

The most common sources of guns used in school shootings and across all school gun violence incidents are the shooter's home or the homes of friends or relatives. This is unsurprising, as nearly 4.6 million American children live in homes with at least one gun that is loaded and unlocked.²⁸ Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that states enact and enforce secure firearm storage laws. In addition, policymakers should promote public awareness programs that can encourage secure gun storage and induce behavior change.

2. PASS EXTREME RISK LAWS

With most active shooter incidents in schools, there are warning signs prior to the shooting. If the shooter legally bought the gun used and had never been convicted of a crime, and their mental health history did not legally prohibit them from buying or having guns, then there may be no existing legal mechanism in the state to prevent the shooter's easy access to guns.

To fill this critical gap in our laws, Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that states enact Extreme Risk laws. These laws create a legal process by which law enforcement, family members, and, in some states, educators can petition a court to temporarily prevent a person from having access to firearms when there is evidence that they are at serious risk of harming themselves or others, giving them the time they need to get help.

3. RAISE THE AGE TO PURCHASE SEMI-AUTOMATIC FIREARMS

Despite the evidence that most active shooters are school-age and have a connection to the school, few states have stepped in to close gaps that allow minors to legally purchase high-powered firearms. Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA believe states and the federal government should raise the minimum age to purchase or possess handguns and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns to 21 in order to prevent school-age shooters from easily obtaining firearms. Under federal law, in order to purchase a handgun from a licensed gun dealer, a person must be 21.⁴² Yet to purchase that same handgun in an unlicensed sale (online or from a private individual), or to purchase a rifle or shotgun from a licensed dealer, a person only has to be 18.⁴³ Only a few states have acted to close these gaps.⁴⁴

4. REQUIRE BACKGROUND CHECKS ON ALL GUN SALES

Background checks are the key to enforcing US gun laws and are an effective tool for keeping guns out of the hands of people with dangerous histories. As part of a comprehensive plan to prevent gun violence in schools, Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend that states and the federal government act to pass laws that require background checks on all gun sales so that potential shooters cannot easily purchase firearms.

Current federal law requires that background checks be conducted whenever a person attempts to purchase a firearm from a licensed gun dealer, to ensure that the prospective buyer is not legally prohibited from possessing guns.⁴⁶ For example, when a person becomes subject to an extreme risk protection order, that record is entered into the federal background check database, and a background check at the point of sale prevents that person from buying a firearm at a gun store. However, current federal law does not require background checks on sales between unlicensed parties, including those at gun shows or online. As such, people with dangerous histories can easily circumvent the background check system simply by purchasing their firearm online or at a gun show.

Maine Ranks 25th in Gun Safety

LEARN MORE

<https://everytownresearch.org/rankings/state/maine/>