

# SAFE SCHOOLS

Senator \_\_\_\_\_ Representative \_\_\_\_\_

Members of the committee.

My name is Susan Morse, and with Safe Schools, Safe Communities,

I am pleased to support LD 424 addressing the use of rapid fire guns

While I have no personal tale of terror, I do have a perspective on the way gun violence in schools can produce a ripple effect to touch farther shores. You shepherd your kid through the insecurities of childhood, and doubtless some bumps and knocks, too. My son's athletic horse slipped and fell, tossing him over its head. Fortunately, sometimes nine-year-olds bounce. In the last practice before the opening game of senior year, an illegal side-tackle tore his ACL. Later, doing farm chores but forgetting the warning, it was, "Dad! Mom! I thought that side of the hayloft was safe!" The tractor had fallen through the floor to the ground level. He had jumped off just in time. With luck they can grow up and lose the foolishness, marry well, get a job, and some of the good moves become normal.

Canaan had finished his degree and marched in three formal ceremonies—and a cloudburst—in May. In September he was a research fellow and lecturer at the University of Virginia. I wish I could have been the proud and excited mama as I hugged him goodbye. I smiled and said all the right words, but my first thought was that UVA was only about three hours from Virginia Tech, where a student killed two students in a dorm room and went on to chain the three doors of a classroom building.

The shooter carried a backpack full of quick-load magazines and the industry's most popular model handguns, a 9mm Glock 19 and a Walther 22, [Val-ter] rapid fire semi-automatic pistols advertised as high-powered, easy to carry and shoot "fast and true." Before this type, the biggest seller had been a revolver, which needed reloading after 6 shots. With one pull of the trigger the semi-automatics fired 15 and 10 rounds, respectively. The police found over 200 casings at the scenes. The gunman left 32 dead—33 at the end—27 students and 5 teachers—another 17 wounded, 6 of whom were injured jumping from a second-story window while their teacher braced the door to give them time to escape. He was shot dead. Four teachers and a graduate student died defending students in place or trying to run down the shooter. That is exactly how my son would have behaved.

Yes, there were unwise delays: first in not communicating earlier with the shooter's parents, and then in the moment when all students could've been warned by texting their phones. Lessons learned. Months earlier, a judge, apprised of the young man's anger and threatening writing, mandated out-patient therapy. The red flag law applied only to patients in medical settings. Perhaps the judge was trying to give him a chance to turn his life around as he had done in high school, becoming an honor student; still, no one checked to make sure he was attending therapy. Even if he had been on a "do not sell" list, Virginia did not require that the seller actually check the list. The constant refrain in these increasingly common events is always, "Improve mental health," a necessary goal to be sure; but the wheels grind slowly and rarely is that the only path needed. Rapid-fire semi-automatic Glocks were originally marketed to police

and U.N. military. Certainly no one wants 15 rounds in a deer or turkey; yet Walthers were advertised as “fun and exciting,” and a high-power, military weapon sold itself, boosting dwindling sales—the original intent.

Studying and teaching should not be high-risk pursuits. Parents, staff, and students should not be apprehensive. Though my mantra is, “Don’t borrow trouble,” we worry. Schools should have challenges—the kinds that spark curiosity and insight, and help students grow. I want everyone’s parents to be just proud moms and dads. Schools should be places where your life is safe.