

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

August 7, 2018

Secretary Betsy DeVos
Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos,

We write today to share the results of a survey of Massachusetts educators, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders on the issue of gun violence in schools. Because the Commonwealth of Massachusetts consistently has the lowest rate of gun violence in the United States, Massachusetts teachers, parents, students, and administrators are uniquely positioned to comment on how policymakers can reduce gun violence in schools. The enclosed report, **Keeping Schools Safe: Perspectives from Massachusetts Educators and Families**, provides detailed information on the views of our constituents. In your role as Chair of the Federal Commission on School Safety, we respectfully request that you share this report with the full Commission.

Every year, more than 30,000 Americans die in gun-related fatalities.¹ Gun-related deaths have surpassed motor vehicle deaths in 21 states,² and the American Medical Association has described gun violence in America as a “public health crisis.”³ In addition to injuries and death associated with gun violence, Boston Children’s Hospital has found that the costs of medical care and missed work associated with gun violence “are in excess of \$14 billion annually.”⁴

The number of “mass public shootings”—or “public attacks in which the shooter and victims were generally unknown to each other and four or more people were killed”—has increased dramatically, nearly tripling since 2011.⁵ As Americans know all too well, schools have also been the targets of mass shootings. Since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, over 187,000 students from more than 193 primary or secondary schools have experienced a shooting on campus.⁶ These school shootings include the February 2018 tragedy in Parkland,

¹ David E. Stark and Nigam H. Shah, “Funding and Publication of Research on Gun Violence and Other Leading Causes of Death,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* (January 3, 2017) (online at <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2595514>).

² Adrienne LaFrance, “Gun Deaths May Not Eclipse Traffic Fatalities Just Yet,” *The Atlantic* (February 8, 2016) (online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/02/guns-cars/460431/>).

³ American Medical Association, “AMA Calls Gun Violence ‘A Public Health Crisis,’” (June 14, 2016) (online at <https://www.ama-assn.org/ama-calls-gun-violence-public-health-crisis>).

⁴ Boston Children’s Hospital, Letter to Members of the Massachusetts Congressional Delegation, (March 22, 2018).

⁵ Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, “Mass shootings becoming more frequent” (2014) (online at <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/mass-shootings-becoming-more-frequent/>).

⁶ John Woodrow Cox and Steven Rich, “Scarred by school shootings,” *Washington Post* (March 25, 2018) (online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/local/us-school-shootings-history/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9482ba99d6b0).

Florida, where a former student opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, killing 17 students and teachers and injuring an additional 17.⁷

In response to the Parkland tragedy, President Donald Trump established the Federal Commission on School Safety to “address school safety and the culture of violence.” As Chair of the Commission, you are tasked with “develop[ing] a process to evaluate and make recommendations on school safety.”⁸ The President asked the Commission to recommend policy proposals in a number of “areas of focus,” including placing “age restrictions [on] certain firearm purchases,” pursuing “opportunities to improve access to mental health treatment,” and developing “best practices for school buildings and campus security.”⁹

To ensure that the Commission hears the voices of our constituents as it develops these policy proposals, we conducted a survey of Massachusetts teachers, parents, school administrators, and other stakeholders requesting input on how the federal government should reduce gun violence in schools. We offered survey takers the opportunity to comment on the wide variety of gun violence prevention policies proposed in the wake of the Parkland shooting. Our analysis of the 384 survey responses we received reveals that:

- **Massachusetts stakeholders support policies that reduce, rather than expand, access to firearms in schools.** More than two-thirds of survey takers opposed policies that would increase the number of guns in K-12 schools—particularly guns wielded by untrained professionals. Notably, roughly 90 percent of respondents expressed the view that arming teachers would not reduce rates of gun violence in school.
- **Massachusetts stakeholders want federal lawmakers to strengthen existing gun laws and make it harder to access firearms.** Nearly 70 percent of respondents cited firearm access as a primary cause of gun violence in school, and many identified strong gun regulation as a key way to reduce violence.
- **Massachusetts stakeholders believe that increased access to mental health services would make educational institutions safer.** Over 90 percent of survey takers felt that making it easier for students to speak with counselors, therapists, and other emotional support professionals would reduce the risk of gun violence.
- **Massachusetts stakeholders generally support enhancing school building security, but do not consider it a solution to gun violence.** While nearly two-thirds of survey takers generally agreed that improving existing security measures would make schools “more safe,” they expressed substantial concern about the impact of increasing school

⁷ David Smiley, “These cops were first to see the dead and wounded in Parkland. Many later sought counseling.” *Miami Herald* (March 9, 2018) (online at <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/broward/article204428874.html>).

⁸ The White House, “President Donald J. Trump is Taking Immediate Actions to Secure Our Schools” (March 12, 2018) (online at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-taking-immediate-actions-secure-schools/>).

⁹ The White House, “President Donald J. Trump is Taking Immediate Actions to Secure Our Schools” (March 12, 2018) (online at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-taking-immediate-actions-secure-schools/>).

security infrastructure schools on students' access to nurturing, supportive learning environments.

We want to highlight that Massachusetts stakeholders believe that increased access to mental health services would make schools safer, and generally do not consider enhancing school building security as a solution to gun violence. We agree with these findings, and we remain deeply concerned about repeated attempts by our Republican colleagues to fund school security infrastructure at the expense of students' access to mental health services. In 2015, Congress established Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, which remain the only federal funding stream dedicated to increasing school mental health services nationwide. We firmly oppose recent efforts to reduce or otherwise divert these funds away from mental health in congressional appropriations.

A more detailed analysis of survey responses can be found in the attached report, **Keeping Schools Safe: Perspectives from Massachusetts Educators and Families**. We respectfully request that you share the findings of our report and the views of our constituents with the Commission and take their concerns and recommendations into account while developing the policy proposals requested by President Trump. Please do not hesitate to reach out to Susannah Savage or Josh Delaney of Senator Warren's staff at 202-224-4543 or Geoff Browning of Rep. Clark's staff at 202-225-2836 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,


Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator
Katherine M. Clark
Member of Congress

CC: The Honorable Jeff Sessions, Attorney General of the United States, Department of Justice
The Honorable Alex Azar, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services
The Honorable Kristjen Nielsen, Secretary, Department of Homeland Security