

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 14, 2019

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW
Washington D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

We write today, on the one-year anniversary of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, to urge you to re-open the Federal Commission on School Safety and re-examine the danger that gun violence poses to our nation's children and the solutions to this violence in our schools and on our streets.

Exactly one year ago, 17 students and staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School were murdered in the deadliest high school shooting in United States history.¹ The Parkland, Florida tragedy was one of 97 school gun violence incidents in 2018, according to the US Naval Postgraduate School, a record-number that topped the previous high by 64 percent.² So far there have been 13 incidents in 2019 – a pace that would establish a new annual high. School gun violence killed 56 people last year, also a record number, and has already killed two in 2019.³

In the immediate aftermath of the Parkland shooting, President Trump put you in charge of a new Federal Commission on School Safety to “address school safety and the culture of violence.”⁴ As the Chair, you were charged with “develop[ing] a process to evaluate and make recommendations on school safety.” Three months later, you told a Senate committee that the commission would not examine the role that guns play in school violence, despite the fact that it was formed in the immediate aftermath of and in response to a school shooting.⁵

In December 2018, your commission issued a toothless report that ignored and evaded the serious problems facing our children today. Semi-automatic weapons have been used in school shootings from Columbine to Sandy Hook to Parkland, yet your 180-page report does not

¹ NBC News, “17 killed in mass shooting at high school in Parkland, Florida,” Elizabeth Chuck, Alex Johnson, and Corky Siemaszko, Feb. 14, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/police-respond-shooting-parkland-florida-high-school-n848101>.

² Center for Homeland Defense and Security, “Incidents by Year,” accessed Feb. 13, 2019, <https://www.chds.us/ssdb/incidents-by-year/>.

³ Center for Homeland Defense and Security, “Number Killed by Year,” accessed Feb. 13, 2019, <https://www.chds.us/ssdb/number-killed-by-year/>.

⁴ The White House, “President Donald J. Trump is Taking Immediate Actions to Secure Our Schools,” Mar. 12, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-taking-immediate-actions-secure-schools/>.

⁵ New York Times, “Trump’s School Safety Commission Won’t Look at Guns, Betsy DeVos Says,” Erica L. Green, Jun. 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/us/politics/devos-guns-school-safety-commission.html>.

contain a single instance of the words “semi-automatic,” “automatic,” or “AR-15” in reference to weapons.⁶ The shooter in Parkland, Florida purchased a long gun as an 18-year-old, and hundreds of school shootings have been committed by teens,⁷ yet your report concludes that “minimum age laws” are “unlikely to be an effective method for preventing or reducing school shootings.”⁸ The report vaguely calls several times for “more comprehensive research,” including on the impact of stricter gun laws, yet it fails to acknowledge the current limitations on the ability of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct gun violence research, and does not recommend removing those limitations.⁹

The report’s recommendations fly in the face of common sense and available evidence. In August 2018, we wrote to you to share the results of a survey of Massachusetts educators, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders on the issue of gun violence in schools. My analysis of 384 survey responses revealed that nearly 70 percent of stakeholders cited firearm access as a primary cause of gun violence in schools.¹⁰ Many respondents identified strong gun regulation as a crucial way to reduce violence.¹¹

Statistics in Massachusetts show that commonsense measures to reduce gun violence work. Massachusetts has some of the strictest gun laws in the nation, including an assault weapons ban, a magazine capacity restriction, background checks for private sales, and extreme risk protection orders.¹² This system, according to experts, “is one of the major reasons Massachusetts consistently reports the lowest gun death rates in the U.S.”¹³

Massachusetts is not alone. Nearly 60 percent of Americans support stricter, commonsense measures to reduce gun violence.¹⁴ In the aftermath of the tragedy in Parkland, 67 percent of Americans supported an assault weapons ban,¹⁵ and the same number supported raising the age restriction for the purchase of a firearm.¹⁶ Additionally, 90 percent of Americans support

⁶ Department of Education, “Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety,” Dec. 18, 2018, <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf>.

⁷ Center for Homeland Defense and Security, “Incidents by Age of Shooter,” accessed Feb. 13, 2019, <https://www.chds.us/ssdb/incidents-by-age-of-shooter/>.

⁸ Department of Education, “Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety,” Dec. 18, 2018, pp. 85-87, <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf>.

⁹ *Id.* at 87.

¹⁰ Letter from Senator Elizabeth Warren to Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, August 7, 2018, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2018-08-08%20Warren-Clark%20gun%20violence%20letter.pdf>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² G.L. c. 140, Sec. 128, 131M; MA Ch. 140 Sec. 121; MA Ch. 140 Sec. 128A; Commonwealth of Massachusetts, “Extreme Risk Protection Orders,” <https://www.mass.gov/extreme-risk-protection-orders>.

¹³ Vox, “I looked for a state that’s taking gun violence seriously. I found Massachusetts.” German Lopez, Nov. 13, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/11/13/17658028/massachusetts-gun-control-laws-licenses>.

¹⁴ Gallup, “Six in 10 Americans Support Stricter Gun Laws,” RJ Reinhart, Oct. 17, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/243797/six-americans-support-stricter-gun-laws.aspx>.

¹⁵ Washington Post, “Does gun control suddenly have real momentum?,” Aaron Blake, Feb. 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/02/20/poll-a-record-high-number-of-americans-support-stricter-gun-laws/?utm_term=.9b5bccf4f274.

¹⁶ Reuters, “Americans Favor Raising Age to Buy Gun, Not Enlist or Vote, Mar. 6, 2018, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/lifestyle/general_lifestyle/march_2018/americans_favor_raising_a_ge_to_buy_gun_not_enlist_or_vote.

universal background checks, including the majority of members of the National Rifle Association (NRA).¹⁷

In the letter we sent you in August, we asked 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.” It is now clear that you failed to consider the concerns of my constituents and the American public. Your report fails to fully examine how gun violence has impacted a generation of American children, and it neglects to consider what the federal government can do to protect our kids. Your commission has failed American students.

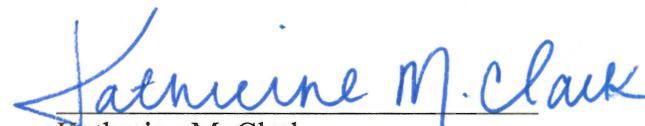
Today is the one-year anniversary of the Parkland shooting. In light of the continued threats facing our schools, our communities, and our children, we urge you to re-open the Commission to more fully examine the evidence that access to firearms contributes to the high rate of gun violence in the United States, and particularly to the dangers facing schools. We hope that my office’s survey – which we have again attached for your consideration - and Massachusetts’s success in reducing gun violence can serve as guides as the Commission attempts to more seriously address these problems.

We owe it to the students of Parkland – and to every student in America – to exhaustively consider every policy option to reduce gun violence in schools, and we hope you will do so.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Katherine M. Clark
Member of Congress

¹⁷ Politifact, “Do 90% of Americans support background checks for all gun sales?,” Tom Kertscher, Oct. 3, 2017, <https://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2017/oct/03/chris-abele/do-90-americans-support-background-checks-all-gun-/>.