

January 9, 2013

The Honorable Mike Thompson
Chairman
Congressional Gun Violence Prevention Task Force
231 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Thompson:

On behalf of our nation's parents, teachers, education support personnel and principals, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the issues raised by the recent tragedy in Newtown. We are writing to provide our recommendations for the taskforce to consider on gun violence prevention, as well as ensuring the safety, health and well-being of every American citizen.

We applaud your leadership in Congress and believe that a multi-faceted approach is necessary to address the practical and systemic issues raised by the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Our nation's schools face the myriad issues that we believe led to the horrible shooting in Newtown, CT, and we must do more as a nation to help parents, educators and principals who serve over fifty million students deal with the challenges that we know result in gun and related violence in our schools and communities. Foremost, our organizations do not believe that guns have a place in our schools, or that arming educators is the answer.

Rather, Congress must take reasonable actions to address the fundamental issues surrounding gun violence, such as unreasonable access to assault or military-style weapons and ammunition, and do more to encourage local education and community health system cooperation so that all professionals in schools, mental health and law enforcement can work together to provide services for students and their families. Professionals, today, are able to identify mental health issues in children at earlier ages – often as young as kindergartners. To address these issues, our organizations urge Congress to take the following actions.

- 1) Reinstating the assault weapons ban, and banning the ability of individuals to purchase high-capacity magazines for assault weapons outside of military use. Our organizations also support strengthening the requirement on background checks for all gun purchases, especially for individuals who have documented treatment for a mental illness.
- 2) Promote access to existing mental health services, which are critical for schools, families and communities. Community and/or school-based health centers must provide mental health screening and services, and share information with appropriate local law enforcement agencies where the safety and well-being of a community may be threatened. Schools must work with mental health service providers to learn how to best assess and respond to potential threats to student safety.

- 3) Establish an inter-agency coordinating council that will work to identify how our nation's existing policies and infrastructure can be strengthened to coordinate services, and remove barriers to service delivery between mental health, education, and justice where threat assessment and safety can be addressed.
- 4) Designate a nationwide public education and awareness campaign about the mental health needs of youth and adults. The campaign must encourage states and local communities to evaluate resources and programs to better meet the mental health and well-being needs of the community, including students and their families. Districts must also be urged to ensure that schools can hire or have adequate access to certified school counselors and psychologists, as well as bullying and harassment prevention programs.
- 5) Many schools serve as the center of a community or a "hub" where social and health services are delivered. School officials must have the necessary skills and authority to strengthen partnerships with local service providers. Congress must give states and districts the flexibility to use federal education, mental health, and justice programmatic funds to assess safety needs, provide mental health services, and respond to potential threats to community safety.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations. The undersigned groups look forward to working with you to enact common sense, pragmatic solutions to help prevent gun violence and address the mental health needs of our country.

Sincerely,

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Federation of Teachers
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Education Association
National School Public Relations Association