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June 24, 2022

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association, who educate and support 50 million students in 14,000 communities across America, we urge you to vote YES on the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.” Votes on this legislation, which the Senate passed yesterday, may be included in the NEA Report Card for the 117th Congress.

NEA members have dedicated their careers to providing an education that instills in students a love of learning, sparks their creativity and curiosity, and helps them develop the tools for success. However, this can only happen in an atmosphere of safety, in which students can engage in the hard work of learning and development and feel secure in their schools, neighborhoods, and homes. We therefore support the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and are grateful for this step toward curbing the gun violence that terrorizes Americans every day.

We are heartened to see the enhanced background checks for gun purchasers under the age of 21, through requiring the National Instant Criminal Background Check System to check juvenile and mental health records via local law enforcement or state databases. Additionally, the educators of NEA consistently advocate for increased attention to and funding for mental-health services, and we applaud the provisions for broadening access to these services—especially school-based programs—in the legislation.

NEA members support the use of Byrne JAG funds for crisis intervention court programs, which could change the trajectory for many troubled families and individuals. We also believe that the new, specific criminal penalties for “straw purchasers” and traffickers of firearms, and the enhanced tools for investigating these offenses, are crucial in deterring and prosecuting violent criminals, domestic terrorists, gangs, and individuals who are prohibited by law from legally receiving firearms.

However, we are disappointed that the Luke and Alex School Safety Act is included. We are concerned that it could lead to further criminalization of students, especially students of color and those in marginalized communities. We will monitor this aspect of the bill closely to ensure that educators, community members, and civil rights organizations are involved in its implementation.

Our major concern is that the legislation, although a positive development, falls far short of the commonsense reforms that the majority of Americans support. We recognize that the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act would represent the most significant change to gun laws in nearly 30 years. Yet, it does not take other important steps, such as raising the minimum age for purchasing semiautomatic weapons from 18 to 21 and requiring universal background checks. We appreciate that the legislation provides funds to states for implementing red flag laws, which temporarily keep individuals who are at elevated risk of harming themselves or others from gaining access to guns. However, that is not the mandatory law that most Americans want.

Until we address the root of our national problem—that there are far too many guns and military-style weapons in rural, urban, and suburban communities of all descriptions—America’s cycle of gun violence, senseless massacres, and bottomless grief will continue. We know what gives us a sense of security: living in communities where we feel safe and can provide for our families, receive the care we need, and build the future we want. We will only realize that vision if Congress continues working toward legislation that truly addresses our epidemic of gun violence, and we are hopeful that the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act moves us closer to that goal. We urge you to vote YES on this important bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marc Egan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association