

Testimony of Max Schachter
“Examining State and Federal Recommendations for
Enhancing School Safety Against Targeted Violence”
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My name is Max Schachter, my son Alex was one of 17 people that were brutally murdered at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School last year. After I buried Alex, my priority was to make sure my other three children were safe in their schools. I traveled the country and came to realize that in all of the 139,000 K-12 schools in this country, each principal has to become an expert in door locks, access control, cameras, etc. It made no sense to me that each school had to reinvent the wheel. The idea that crystalized for me was the need to create National School Safety Best Practices at the federal level. Those best practices would be housed on a clearinghouse website so that all schools had a one-stop shop for all of the most relevant and important school safety information.

I was pleased to see this idea called out in the recommendations made by the Federal Commission on School Safety last year. And I am really encouraged that the Department of Homeland Security is moving forward to create the clearinghouse. In fact they are convening their first meeting July 30.

We know we can't prevent 100% of these school mass murders. But we know that we absolutely CAN mitigate a lot of risk to students, teachers, and staff when they do happen. Every school can do things TODAY to improve school safety. Many of those things – the “basics” – cost little or no money.

Chairman Johnson, I really want to commend you for your commitment to focusing on practical solutions that can save lives right now, and for shining a spotlight on that through the hearing you're holding today.

In my view there are 2 main reasons the national school security crisis has continued with no end in sight: The first is we do not implement lessons that have been painfully learned, two, we are not being honest to parents and communities about the real situation with safety in our schools.

On the first point, we do not IMPLEMENT lessons learned from dozens of incidents that have taken place. For example, after the Virginia Tech massacre, Virginia implemented threat assessment teams in all their schools. They have not had a school shooting since. Unfortunately, no other state has followed suit. After Columbine, all responding officers were required to rapidly deploy directly to the threat. Yet in Parkland, 8 deputies waited outside for 11 minutes while kids and staff were being slaughtered. In Parkland, first responder radios failed and were not interoperable, delaying help for victims. SWAT teams had to resort to hand signals to avoid shooting each other because their radios failed. Yet as a country we haven't truly committed to solving the communications problems. We can't force all agencies to use a single radio system, but we CAN make it possible for them to communicate no matter what system they are using.

After Sandy Hook each school should have trained their students and staff how to respond to active shooters. During the 2017-2018 school year, Marjory Stoneman Douglas did not hold a

single code red drill, so kids and staff did not know what to do when the murderer started firing his AR-15 into classrooms and killing their classmates. No staff member called a code red until 3 minutes after the shooting started. By then all 17 people were dead, including my little Alex.

The second sad reality – which most people don't realize – is that schools are not being truthful about the violence on their campus. For example, for the years 2014-2017 Marjory Stoneman Douglas reported to the state ZERO bullying, ZERO harassment, and ZERO trespassing incidents. It's not just Broward County that is inaccurately reporting these incidents. I have to believe this is pervasive across the country. The result is a false sense of security which leads to complacency in implementing school safety best practices.

On college campuses, the federal Cleary Act imposes large financial penalties for reporting inaccurate campus crime statistics. In K-12 there is such no requirement. The result is that if you go online to look at school ratings, many of them, including Marjory Stoneman Douglas, have an 'A' rating. Academics are obviously critical, but those ratings have nothing to do with the SAFETY of those institutions. There is no school safety rating system to inform parents and teachers if their school has implemented best practices to prevent and mitigate casualties during the next school attack. Schools should NOT be able to get an A rating like Marjory Stoneman Douglas did if they NEVER held a code red drill for the entire school year. They should NOT be rewarded if they did not train their teachers and students what to do in an active assailant emergency. If a safety rating system existed, it would influence change nationwide. The car industry's rating system has improved car safety and decreased fatalities. Before you buy a car you review their safety and crash test rating. For parents there is nothing. No way to know if your child's school is safe.

I wish everyone would realize that if students and staff do not make it home alive to their families at the end of the day, nothing else matters. Implementing school security best practices—starting with the basics – has to be a priority. Any federal grants that can be used to enhance school safety and security should be tied to those best practices.

It has been 20 years since the Columbine massacre and children continue to be murdered in their classrooms. We know the next school mass murderer is already out there. The gun that he will use is already out there. It is not a question of IF, it is a question of WHEN. We know what CAN be done to prevent it, and we know what MUST be done to mitigate the risk of more lives lost. I hope this committee will help get us where we need to be. Thank you for your commitment, Mr. Chairman and Senator Peters. I look forward to your questions.