



Americans Against Gun Violence
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2026 National High School Essay Contest \$1,000 Winner

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A Phrase He Never Needed to Know

If Dr. Michael North visited my school, someone would have to sit him down and explain a phrase he has never needed to know.

“Lockdown Drills.” The lights go off, the door locks, and everyone presses their backs against the wall and waits in silence. We have practiced it so many times that during one drill last year, the minutes passed with thoughts of lunch rather than any real fear. That is honestly the most unsettling part, not the drills themselves, but the fact that they stopped feeling like anything at all.

Dr. North lost his daughter Sophie at Dunblane Primary School in 1996 and helped lead the campaign that resulted in Great Britain completely banning civilian handgun ownership. Speaking at the 2023 Americans Against Gun Violence dinner, he said something that is difficult to move past: “The thought of having armed guards and ‘lockdown drills’ never crossed our minds.” His country decided the phrase “lockdown drills” was unnecessary before anyone ever had to learn it.

The United States of America went the other direction. After every shooting, the laws stay largely unchanged while the vocabulary keeps expanding – “shelter-in-place,” “run-hide-fight,” “trauma kit” - phrases that now get taught to younger kids every year until a first grader knows exactly which corner of her classroom is safest. According to Education Week, more than 300 school shootings occurred in the United States in 2023 alone.

The 2008 *Heller* decision, which for the first time in over 200 years of constitutional history interpreted the Second Amendment as granting an individual right to gun ownership unrelated to military service, endorsed a fraudulent misrepresentation of the Second Amendment that the gun lobby has spent decades in promoting and that

politicians have been using as an excuse for inaction. With an estimated 400 million guns already in circulation, reducing our country's vast pool of privately owned guns is not something that can be done in a day, but A 5-4 ruling that reversed two centuries of legal precedent is not permanent law. It is a contested interpretation, and this country should pursue gun control laws comparable to Great Britain's because the evidence that they work is not in dispute.

Britain faced serious resistance to tightening its gun control laws after the Dunblane Primary School mass shooting but moved forward regardless. The UK now reports roughly 0.2 gun-related deaths per 100,000 population annually, including homicides, suicides, and accidents, compared to 12.8 in the United States, a rate that is 64 times higher. In his keynote address, Dr. North noted that the gun-related homicide rate alone in the United States is 100 times higher than in Britain. These vast differences demonstrate the real-life consequences of stringent gun control laws versus lax ones.

My generation has grown up living with the consequences of lax gun control laws, but we don't have to treat our country's lack of effective gun control as inevitable. We need to follow the example of Dr. North and demand that the *Heller* decision be overturned and that our elected officials enact stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws in Great Britain.

Dr. North never had to learn what a "lockdown drill" was, and thanks to him and his British colleagues, British school children don't need to know what "lockdown drills" are either. That should be the goal for children in our country as well.