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## **2026 National High School Essay Contest First Place Winner**

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### *Thoughts and Prayers Don't Stop Bullets*

When Dr. Michael North lost his five year old daughter Sophie in the 1996 Dunblane Primary School mass shooting, his immediate response was not to train other children to hide under desks. It was to make sure no child ever had to.

The Dunblane Primary School massacre was committed by a man who legally owned the handguns he used to commit his horrific crime. At the time of the shooting, Britain already banned so-called "assault rifles." Within two years of the Dunblane shooting, thanks to the efforts of Dr. North, his fellow grieving Dunblane parents, and hundreds of thousands of other outraged citizens, Great Britain completely banned civilian handgun ownership. There has not been a single school shooting since.

In a keynote address that he delivered at an Americans Against Gun Violence banquet in 2023, Dr. North stated that, when he and the other Dunblane parents discussed what they should do to prevent another tragedy like the Dunblane massacre, "The thought of having armed guards and 'lockdown drills' never crossed our minds."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. North's statement highlights a harsh reality in the United States: armed guards and lockdown drills are the first things on our minds. We drill children to barricade doors and silence their phones, and we station armed guards at elementary school entrances.

After every school shooting that flashed across the news throughout my middle school years, I found myself mentally mapping escape routes from my own classrooms – which window, door, or corner offered the best chance of survival. Lockdown drills, rather than soothing that fear, only reinforce it. When the news cycle

## Thoughts and Prayers Don't Stop Bullets

moves on and legislators send “thoughts and prayers” while leaving our country’s gun laws unchanged, the message to students is clear: your safety is not the priority. Our country has accepted, as routine, a level of gun violence the rest of the world rightly considers unconscionable. The simple difference between Britain and the United States is that the British chose to adopt stringent gun control laws that would prevent school shootings, whereas the US has chosen to leave lax gun control laws in place, and drill our children and teachers to prepare for the next shooting.

Gun rights advocates may point to outliers like the 2025 Bondi Beach attack in Australia, isolated incidents in countries with strict gun laws – but comparison at scale refutes that argument. At the time that Dr. North spoke at the Americans Against Gun Violence dinner, in late October of 2023, there had been just 25 gun-related homicides that year in all of Britain,<sup>2</sup> while in the United States there were 17,927 gun-related homicides.<sup>3</sup> Population adjusted figures show that, in most recent years, the gun homicide rate in the United States has been at least 100 times greater than the rate in Britain. No honest reading of these numbers can support the claim that rigorous gun control laws are not effective.

The political obstacles to change in America have been prominent: a gun lobby with deep ties to legislators, and a segment of the population that prioritizes easy access to guns over the safety of our country’s children and youth. But these obstacles are not insurmountable, as we saw Dr. North faced similar in Britain: the distracting arguments of “guns don’t kill people, people kill people,” and accusations that the grieving Dunblane families were acting on emotion. He and his colleagues persevered anyway, sustaining pressure on lawmakers, speaking with a unified voice, and refusing feeble compromises. They proved that effecting dramatic changes in gun control laws does not require holding an elected office or a law degree. Dr. North was a biochemist and a widowed father, and the Snowdrop Campaign, named after the only flower in bloom at the time of the Dunblane massacre and which gathered 700,000 handwritten signatures in support of the handgun ban within just three months, was started by local mothers.<sup>4</sup> The campaign that reshaped British gun law was built by ordinary citizens with an extraordinary resolve to ensure that another tragedy would never happen again in their country.

We students in the United States of America are already living inside this crisis, reminded constantly by armed guards, death-simulating drills, and headlines that normalize brutal violence, forcing us to mentally chart escape routes. It is time for our young generation to hold this country’s lawmakers to the same standard that the British people held theirs. We’re tired of being sent thoughts and prayers – they don’t stop bullets. Instead, ban the guns that fire them.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Michael North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," Americans Against Gun Violence Annual Meeting, Sacramento, California, October 21, 2023, 9, <https://aagunv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Dr.-Norths-Keynote-Address-w-Bills-intro.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 7.
- <sup>3</sup> "Fatal Injury Data | WISQARS | Injury Center | CDC," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed July 1, 2021, <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 3–4.