



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

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Life, Liberty...and Lockdowns?

“Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” is the phrase I see each morning when I walk into my school building, the words etched above each classroom door. For more than two centuries, these words have been a pledge and foundational belief of our country. Yet those promises have felt hollow as I’ve huddled in corners with my classmates, holding my breath and trembling as we wondered if the lockdown wasn’t just a drill this time.

For most of my life I didn’t consider that school shootings could be prevented. I considered them something we could only minimize the impacts of, like an earthquake, a tornado, or tsunami. By doing drills and reviewing lockdown protocols, I thought my government was doing its best to protect me.

Then I came across the prompt for this essay contest. During his keynote speech, Dr. Michael North, who lost his daughter in the 1996 mass shooting at the primary school in Dunblane Scotland, talked about the discussions he and other grieving parents had about the steps they should take to prevent another tragedy. He said, “The thought of having armed guards and ‘lockdown drills’ never crossed our minds.”

This statement helped me realize that lockdown drills are a totally inadequate response to the threat of school shootings. I discovered that many countries have adopted robust gun control laws that prevent school shootings and other forms of gun violence from occurring in the first place. Countries like Australia and Japan, which have implemented such laws, now have extremely low rates of gun violence. Britain is a strong example of the long-term success of these policies. In 1996, the

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Dunblane Primary School mass shooting left 16 children and their teacher dead, their families devastated and mourning, and the public angry. In response to a grassroots campaign led by Dr. North and other Dunblane parents, the British government completely banned civilian ownership of handguns within two years of the massacre. Since the ban went into effect, Britain has not had another school shooting.

Three years after the Dunblane Primary School massacre, The United States faced a similar mass shooting at Columbine High School, where fourteen people tragically fell victim to bullets fired by two students. In response, schools in America implemented lockdown drills and mental health checks. Unlike Britain, over 2,000 people have been killed or wounded by gunfire in American K-12 campuses since Columbine. This number is so high that many people don't take notice of reports of school shootings on the news; our country now numbed to this heinous violence. The United States is one of the richest nations in the world, and we claim to be one of the most "advanced," yet we have failed to protect our kids from being shot and killed in their classrooms.

I am angry that we have ignored a solution as simple as adopting gun control laws and had a horrific number of kids return home in body bags by consequence. I am infuriated that we have accepted that every child, parent, and teacher should be burdened by fear every school day. Most of all, I am livid that we have chosen to love our guns more than our children.

I share this anger with young people across the nation who are tired of being afraid. But rather than letting our anger fester, we must use it to demand change. We must protest for those who are too young to protest for themselves, and we must not allow school shootings and other forms of gun violence to become the norm.

We may not be able to vote yet, but we are the future of our country. We must be bold in telling our current legislators that we are appalled that they have prioritized the interests of the gun lobby over the safety of our country's children and youth. We must demand that our country adopt stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws in other countries like Britain. And we must not rest until we have made the United States of America a place where the phrase, "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" can finally ring true.

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