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## **2026 National High School Essay Contest \$1,000 Winner**

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*Britain Chose Children Over Guns. Why Can't We?*

Dr. Michael North stood before a banquet hall filled with Americans Against Gun Violence supporters in 2023 and presented a keynote address forged in unimaginable grief. Twenty-seven years earlier, his five-year-old daughter Sophie had been murdered alongside fifteen classmates and their teacher at the Dunblane Primary School in Scotland. Within two years of that tragedy, thanks in large part to the concerted efforts of Dr. North and other grieving Dunblane parents, Britain banned all handguns. As Dr. North presented his keynote address twenty-seven years later, there have been zero subsequent school shootings in Britain.<sup>1</sup> In the United States of America, from 1997 to the time of this writing there have been nearly 2,500 shootings on U.S. campuses.<sup>2</sup> The staggering contrast between Britain's response to a single school shooting and our own country's response to thousands of school shootings reveals a fundamental difference in national values.

Britain's response to Dunblane demonstrates what genuine prioritization of child safety looks like. When Thomas Hamilton walked into that Scottish school with legally owned handguns and murdered sixteen children and their teacher, the British public refused to accept thoughts and prayers as being sufficient. The Snowdrop Petition, named after the only flower that was in bloom in Dunblane at the time of the massacre, collected over 700,000 signatures through volunteers with pen and paper forms. This was a nation united in refusing to accept the murder of school children and their teacher as a reasonable tradeoff for allowing civilians to legally own handguns for sport or for a false sense of security.

Compare this to America's response to Sandy Hook Elementary School, where twenty first-graders and six female staff members were slaughtered in 2012. We implemented precisely nothing at the federal level. Instead, we

adopted lockdown drills, armed guards, and “bullet proof” backpacks. As Dr. North noted, the idea of children enduring constant trauma from lockdown drills would have appalled the Dunblane families. They chose to eliminate the threat, not teach children to hide from it.

I have been required to participate in lockdown drills since elementary school. Every month we practice huddling silently in corners and barricading doors with desks. These drills do not make me feel safe. Instead, they are regular reminders that my country has normalized the threat of me, my classmates, and my teachers being murdered at school. Britain chose differently. They made schools actually safe rather than training students and teachers to accept danger.

The excuses offered by American gun rights advocates mirror those Britain rejected. “Guns don't kill people, people kill people,” yet somehow Britain has one-hundredth our gun homicide rate.<sup>3</sup> “Gun laws only hurt law-abiding citizens,” yet Thomas Hamilton, like most U.S. mass shooters, was a law-abiding citizen until he committed his horrific crime; and even the number of illegal handguns in circulation in Britain dropped after the ban.<sup>4</sup> When guns become less available, gun violence decreases.

The greatest obstacle to adopting British-style gun control is lack of political will, not the U.S. Constitution. Dr. North noted in his keynote address that the claim that the Second Amendment codified a broad right to private gun ownership that our Founders inherited from their English ancestors is “preposterous.”<sup>5</sup> The English people never had such a right. Dr. North also described how he and his colleagues faced fierce opposition from a well-funded British gun lobby. They got the handgun ban enacted anyway, because grieving parents and public opinion proved stronger than special interests. The real barrier to adopting a similar ban in our country is our collective tolerance for children and teachers being killed in their classrooms.

Dr. North and his colleagues succeeded in getting the British handgun ban enacted by focusing on a clear goal, refusing to compromise on partial measures, and avoiding distracting peripheral issues. My generation of American youth – the “lockdown generation” - must follow their example and never allow anyone to make lockdown drills seem normal or a handgun ban seem radical.

Dr. North concluded his keynote address with words that should haunt every American: "Britain and other countries have shown through their actions, and not just their words, that they love their children more than their guns." Every day we fail to take definitive steps to prevent school shootings and other forms of gun violence, we prove otherwise. The children of Sandy Hook,

Parkland, and Uvalde deserved to grow up. We owe it to them, to the children and youth of today, and to future children that we may ourselves bring into the world to prove through our actions and not just our words that we love our own children at least as much as the British people love theirs.

#### 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, <https://aagunv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Dr.-Norths-Keynote-Address-w-Bills-intro.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> David Riedman, "How Many School Shootings? All Incidents from 1996-Present," K-12 School Shooting Database, accessed May 18, 2026, <https://k12ssdb.org/all-shootings>.

<sup>3</sup> North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 1.

<sup>4</sup> North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 7.

<sup>5</sup> North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 10.