Americans Against Gun Violence
7862 Winding Way #151
Fair Oaks, CA 95628
(916) 668-4160
aagunv.org / info@aagunv.org

2026 National High School Essay Contest $1,000 Winner

Keene Kellerhouse

Shaker High School, Latham, New York

My Generation Must Make A Choice

I have practiced lockdown drills since elementary school. The procedure was simple: lock the classroom door, push a desk against it, turn off the lights, and sit in the corner away from windows. We did it quietly and we did it well. At some point it stopped feeling unusual. It was just something school included, like standardized testing or fire drills.

Reading the keynote address that Dr. Michael North delivered at the 2023 Americans Against Gun Violence annual dinner changed how I see that normalization. Dr. North lost his five year old daughter, Sophie, in the 1996 Dunblane Primary School mass shooting. Fifteen of Sophie's classmates and their teacher were also killed by a gunman who legally owned the handgun he used to commit the massacre. At the time of the Dunblane shooting, Britain already had a complete ban on civilian ownership of automatic and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns. Following the Dunblane massacre, Dr. North helped lead the campaign that resulted in Great Britain completely banning civilian handgun ownership. In his keynoted address, Dr. North said that when he and other grieving Dunblane parents were considering 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."

I am seventeen and finishing high school in New York. In my lifetime, there have been mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut; at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; and at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Ten years before I was born, there was a mass shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado. Instead of banning the guns used in the shooting, our country started requiring K-12 students to participate in lockdown drills.

After every mass shooting, there have been memorials and debates. In some cases, there have also been limited changes in gun laws. At many schools, armed guards were added. But the shootings - and the drills – have continued. In contrast to Britain's response to the single Dunblane Primary School mass shooting, the response of the United States to multiple mass shootings has largely been to adopt measures intended to make students and teachers better at surviving them rather than to ban the guns that are used to commit them.

The difference in the effectiveness of the British response as compared with the U.S. response is measurable and dramatic. As Dr. North mentioned in his keynote address, there hasn't been even a single other school shooting in Britain since the handgun ban went into effect, and the rate of gun-related homicides in Britain is 1/100th the rate in the United States. And Britain isn't the only example of other countries that have dramatically reduced their rates of gun violence, including the threat of school shootings, by adopting stringent gun control laws that drastically reduce the pool of privately owned guns. Other high-income democracies have on average one tenth or less the rate of gun-related deaths in our country, and students in those other countries aren't practicing lockdown drills.

Our country's powerful gun lobby claims that the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits the United States from adopting stringent gun control laws comparable to the laws in Britain and other high income democratic countries. But the first time the Second Amendment was ever interpreted by the Supreme Court as conferring an individual right to own guns unrelated to service in a "well regulated militia" was the *Heller* decision in 2008, one year before I was born. In other words, the right to private gun ownership in the United States is only one year older than I am. The *Heller* decision, decided by a narrow 5-4 majority of justices, reversed over two centuries of prior legal precedent. Like hundreds of other Supreme Court decisions, *Heller* can be reversed as well.

I think about our country's epidemic of gun violence as someone who has studied data in math and computer science classes. The relationship between the rate of private gun ownership and the rate of gun-related deaths is neither ambiguous nor coincidental at the international level. As the graph that's included in the Americans Against Gun Violence mission statement shows, the United States is an extreme outlier in both categories.

What role can young people play in preventing school shootings and other forms of gun violence? I believe the most important thing we can do right now is refuse to treat the current situation as normal. Accepting lockdown drills as routine is accepting a policy failure as a permanent condition.

But we can do much more than just protest the *status quo*. The youth of my generation will soon be able to vote, run for office themselves, and become the

people who decide whether to continue the present course or to follow the examples of Britain and other high-income democracies. We must decide to do more than just manage the threat of school shootings and other forms of gun violence. We must do everything within our power to eliminate the threat altogether.

Dr. North concluded his keynote address by stating:

> We and the rest of Britain responded to Dunblane in a way which showed beyond doubt how much more we love our children more than we love guns. I sincerely hope that sometime soon Americans find a way to take the boldest possible measures so that this can be said of your country too. Your children deserve nothing less.

It is now up to me and my generation to show through our actions and not just our words that like Dr. North and his British colleagues, we love our country's children far more than we love its guns.