



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

Amelia Inglis

Attending a High School in Pennsylvania

### *A Government with a Gun to Its Head*

When a tragedy like a school shooting occurs, who bears the responsibility of ensuring it cannot happen again? According to the United States government, the answer is overworked, underpaid teachers and literal *children*, most too young to vote on their own behalf or serve in the military— yet to the front lines they go, armed with pencils, notebooks, and perhaps the desire to obtain an education. The commonplace US policy of educator-led lockdown drills, “Stop the Prop” signs on doors, and ballistic shields for backpacks contrasts poignantly with Britain’s actions after their first— and *only*— school shooting. Upon reading Dr. North’s address at the 2023 Americans Against Gun Violence Dinner and learning that British advocates succeeded in passing a complete ban on handguns only two years after the Dunblane Primary School massacre,<sup>1</sup> I was struck with a crushing feeling of betrayal.

In my school, we have an armed policeman present every day, doors are not allowed to be propped open with doorstops, and teachers are specifically trained to defend themselves and their students against violent intruders with whatever is available in the classroom. I have been told to throw chairs, textbooks, backpacks, anything that might keep me alive when staring down the barrel of a gun. My Spanish teacher stows a baseball bat under his desk. So to see Dr. North say that “the idea of having armed guards and ‘lockdown drills’ never crossed our minds”<sup>2</sup> while my country is wracked with hundreds of school shootings per year<sup>3</sup> and yet continues, unflinching, to place emphasis on keeping school doors locked...how can one reconcile with the disconnect? The heartlessness?

In his address, Dr. North discussed the opposition his movement faced from powerful gun lobbyists, some of whom resorted to measures like death threats, smear campaigns, and misinformation. Despite encountering such pressures, the UK government overwhelmingly decided that they “love their children more than their guns.”<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, thanks to American gun lobbyists and the lawmakers in their pockets, millions of children in the US wake each day knowing that school shootings are seen as an inevitability to mitigate instead of an evil to end, knowing their lives may be the price for a gunman’s so-called freedom. It is hard to feel safe, hard to feel respected, in a country that places such meager value on one’s future.

Indeed, the lack of gun regulation in the US has just as much to do with profit and power as it does with a basic lack of empathy. Many American politicians rely on the political support they receive from gun lobbyists, and they fear that endorsing gun control legislation would lose them their cushy seats in the Capitol and the donations that come along with them. The NRA spent over \$36 million to influence the 2016 national election,<sup>5</sup> and every year since 2013, gun lobbyists have spent more than \$10 million to oppose gun regulation and block sensible measures that receive even bipartisan support.<sup>6</sup> Expensive “gun rights” lobbying and the heavy influence the gun industry wields in Washington have directly translated into school shootings that occur with alarming frequency and provoke little change. Our politicians, faced with the metaphorical and literal guns of these lobbyists, have decided that the political and financial backing they receive from them is more important than the safety of schoolchildren. But I refuse to believe that \$10 million a year is all the lives of American youth are worth. I refuse to be treated as a statistic, a side effect, an unfortunate but necessary cost. I need my representatives to follow the example of Dr. North and Britain, and if they don’t, I need them out of office.

Great Britain has not had another school shooting since the law banning handguns went into effect, and their homicide rate is 100 times lower than America’s.<sup>7</sup> What will it take for the US government, which oversees a nation with the highest gun violence rates of any high-income developed country,<sup>8</sup> to view such a situation as a worthy alternative to a paycheck from the gun lobby? It is becoming clearer and clearer that my generation cannot count on present politicians to give us more than thoughts and prayers; we must become the ones who make the legislation instead of the ones who beg for it. It is not the responsibility of school districts to stop mass shootings—restrictions on gun ownership must be ingrained into federal law, and American youth must lead the charge to enact

these restrictions. How many children must die, how many loved ones must grieve, before we learn our lesson?

### 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> North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 9.

<sup>3</sup> "Number of K-12 School Shootings U.S. 1999-2026," Statista, May 2026, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1463594/number-of-k-12-school-shootings-us/?srslid=AfmBOortzTKwS04LV4RiVO98n3KGMT-BVIZz7WYfGRJhCHUJPMFONSGv>.

<sup>4</sup> North, "Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States," 11.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Friedman, "The NRA Has Broken Its Record for Election Spending," *The Trace*, October 12, 2016, <https://www.thetrace.org/2016/10/nra-breaks-campaign-spending-record/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Gun Rights Lobbying," OpenSecrets, accessed June 9, 2026, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/lobbying?cycle=2024&ind=Q13>.

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

<sup>8</sup> "Preventing Firearm Related Deaths and Injuries in the United States of America: Mission Statement of Americans Against Gun Violence," Americans Against Gun Violence, April 19, 2023, <https://aagunv.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/4-19-23-revised-mission-statement-w-refs.pdf>. See graph showing the direct relationship at the international level between rates of private gun ownership and rates of gun-related deaths.