



Americans Against Gun Violence  
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## **Dr. Michael North\* Reflects on Helping Choose the Winners in our National High School Essay Contest<sup>†</sup>**

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I'm Mick North, at my home in Perthshire, Scotland. In 2020 I was asked to select the top three winners of the Americans Against Gun Violence's National High School Essay Contest. That year the prompt had been a position statement previously published by the American Academy of Pediatrics: "*Firearm regulations, to include bans of handguns and assault weapons, are the most effective way to reduce firearm-related injuries.*" I'd been involved in a successful campaign to ban handguns here in the UK, and it was sobering and disturbing to read about the impact that your country's problem with firearms was having on its younger generation. I felt the same after being asked to choose the top three essays in the 2023 Contest - the prompt then was "Describe your thoughts about lockdown drills conducted in response to the threat of shootings on American school campuses."

This year I was invited for a third time to select the top three winning essays, a special privilege as the prompt was an excerpt from a keynote speech I'd made at the Americans Against Gun Violence's annual dinner in Sacramento in 2023.<sup>‡</sup>

My 5-year-old daughter Sophie was a victim of a school shooting in Scotland in March 1996. A man armed with four legally-held handguns entered the gymnasium at Dunblane Primary School and killed a teacher and sixteen five- and six-year-olds, injured many other victims, and then killed himself. More than thirty years have passed, yet it remains Britain's one and only school shooting. The reason: we made sure that the actual danger to which our children had been exposed that day, the ease with which a person had armed himself with lethal

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\* Dr. North has a Ph.D. in Biochemistry. When we brought him to the United States to be our keynote speaker in 2023, we learned that he preferred to be addressed by his nickname, "Mick."

<sup>†</sup> Winning essays from the current year and links to winning essays from previous years are posted on the High School Essay Contest page of the Americans Against Gun Violence website.

<sup>‡</sup> Links to both the text and video versions of Dr. North's 2023 keynote address are posted on the Events and Other Resources page of our website.

weapons, was eliminated. Our response to the deaths of our children was to campaign to get those lethal weapons banned, and within two years our legislators had changed the gun laws and ensured that all private ownership of handguns was banned. For us, this was the only appropriate way to make sure our children would have a safer future. And so it has proved.

I've previously highlighted that the reasons a person could own a gun in Britain had been limited, but at the time of the Dunblane shootings it had still been relatively easy to buy and keep multi-shot handguns, simply by expressing a wish to do target shooting. Public safety was not prioritised, the wishes of gun enthusiasts still prevailed. Everything changed following our campaign, but whilst Dunblane became a one-off school shooting here, you don't need me to remind you that such events have become all too frequent in the United States of America.

After Dunblane, we knew immediately that the way to respond to a dreadful school shooting was not to turn our schools into fortresses simply because gun owners wanted to avoid being impacted in any way by the tragedy and just wished to carry on "as normal." As I stated in my keynote address in 2023, and as the excerpt from my speech that was used as the prompt for this year's essay contest says: "*The thought of having armed guards and "lockdown drills" never crossed our minds.*" There was another way. Eliminate the danger by eliminating the weapons.

As is evident from this year's essays, armed guards and "lockdown drills" are still widely viewed as the solution in the US, regardless of the impact on the students. As I read their essays it felt that, for many of the entrants, my prompt had been an eye-opener, that they now recognised there is an alternative to the American way. If guns were less easily available, students wouldn't have to continue to practise hiding away from the threat posed by someone who might readily arm themselves. The students' words revealed how the frequent lockdowns offer them little comfort and reassurance, and simply add trauma to their school life. They expressed a wish for a better way - get American guns under tighter control and eliminate the threat. The students realise that their own experience is one that would be alien to their British counterparts, and their words reveal how well they understand the reasons why.

I read the twelve essays that had been shortlisted for the top prizes. The standard was incredibly high, and the task of selecting the top three prize-winners from these was never going to be easy.

Third place went to a student whose essay took the form of his thoughts to my daughter Sophie. Such an approach might have proved mawkish, but never was. The writer skillfully and subtly used the essay to express how drills are viewed as

“normal,” when they should never be. “I don’t want to forget that this isn’t how it’s supposed to be,” he said, to which I can only add, “You are so right!”

In the second prize essay the writer talked about “security theaters” and described how the illusion of reducing harm had failed tragically. His point about the need to debunk the myth that “liberty includes easy access to lethal weapons” is so important. And it was spot on too to state, in the final paragraph, that “Lockdown drills are not a solution to gun violence, but rather a result of inaction.”

The top prize went to the student whose essay, in my opinion, was a master-class, as it encapsulated and summarised so many of the relevant arguments. It was written in a particularly mature and succinct style, and should be compulsory reading for all legislators, no more so than those who, in their complacency, think that the horror of school shootings can simply be resolved through retrospective and posthumous “thoughts and prayers,” but little more.

I would like to congratulate each and every one of the entrants for the way they responded to the words in my quote. The standard was very high, and I’m pleased that it’s been possible to award prizes to so many students.<sup>§</sup> They are all well-deserved.

Looking back at the comments I made on the essay winners in 2020, I note I’d said that “in an America represented by these essay winners there is hope that something will happen quickly and soon.” I can certainly say the same again after reading the leading entries in this year’s Contest. I am confident they reflect the views and concerns of so many future voters, and the sooner US legislators wake up to this the better. This is a generation whose lives have, on a routine basis, been exposed to the adverse impact that easy gun ownership and misuse has had. This should never be “normal.” and as we’ve shown in the UK it doesn’t have to be this way. All our children should have the opportunity to grow up feeling safe and secure, no more so than when they’re at school, and they should never have to be institutionally traumatised through repeated lockdown drills.

I can only imagine that the experience of going through numerous lockdowns will linger for far too long, a sad legacy of the American educational process. But to the students who’ve had to endure it, please don’t forget the impact it had on you and how it will continue to affect future generations unless your country does something about the proliferation of guns. In Britain we showed that it’s possible to turn things around, so never give up on wanting change.

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<sup>§</sup> We awarded a total of \$25,000 in scholarships in our 2026 contest divided among 31 winners, including \$3,000, \$2,500, and \$2,000, respectively, to the first, second, and third place winners.

And do stay informed. Keep comparing what's happening in your country with what happens elsewhere – there is no doubt that the scale of gun death in the US is disproportionately high, and the population should be constantly made aware of this. More people are murdered with guns on an average day in the USA than throughout a whole year in Britain. Over the last twelve months there have only been nineteen (19) gun homicides in England, Scotland and Wales. We've ensured that it is not only British school students who've been made safer, it's been the whole population.

As a member of Gun Control Network, the organisation I helped to set up in 1996, I still work hard to ensure that public safety remains paramount in the UK, whenever gun ownership is being discussed. It takes a lot to counter the obsessive wishes of the gun lobby which remain ongoing here in the UK, but if we want to live in a safe society, those wishes have to be resisted and rejected. I trust that the young Americans whose words I've had the privilege of reading in the last few weeks will be doing their best to rescue their country from the scourge of gun violence and the threat of school shootings.

Thank you