



Americans Against Gun Violence  
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## 2026 National High School Essay Contest \$100 Winner

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### *Code Red, White, and Blue*

Dr. Michael North, who lost his five year old daughter Sophie in the 1996 mass shooting at Dunblane Primary School in Scotland, and who subsequently helped lead the successful campaign to ban civilian handgun ownership in Great Britain, was invited to be the keynote speaker at the 2023 Americans Against Gun Violence annual dinner. During his speech, he said that when he and the other grieving Dunblane parents were considering what they should do to prevent a similar tragedy from occurring in the future:

The thought of having armed guards and “lockdown drills” never crossed our minds.<sup>1</sup>

**“Never crossed our minds.”** In Britain, the question was never where to hide. It was why handguns were legal in the first place. Britain already had a complete ban on so-called “assault rifles” at the time of the Dunblane massacre, but within two years of the Dunblane shooting, the British government also completely banned civilian handgun ownership. In the 27 years since the handgun ban went into effect, there has not been a single school shooting on British soil. The thought of having armed guards and lockdown drills never crossed the minds of Dr. North and the other grieving Dunblane parents because they eliminated the threat of school shootings by banning the guns used to commit them.

In America, the thought of having armed guards and lockdown drills never leaves my mind.

I grew up with the contradictions of American gun culture. I walk past the September 11 memorial every morning on my way to school, a monument to the terrorist attack

that destroyed the World Trade Center in 2001. I then walk into my school where we routinely practice hiding from a different kind of attack, but one that is still terrifying. Our country reacted in dramatic fashion when almost 3,000 people were killed in the September 11 World Trade Center attack.<sup>2</sup> From 2001 through 2024, though, nearly 90,000 U.S. civilians have been killed with guns<sup>3</sup> – a death toll that is equivalent to that of 30 World Trade Center attacks – and gunshot wounds have become the leading cause of death for U.S. children and adolescents,<sup>4</sup> yet no definitive action has been taken to stop this epidemic.

I was nine years old the first time my teacher whispered, "Code Red" and clustered us behind a bookshelf, the one that smelled like rubber cement, with a ripped "Safe Space" poster hanging off the edge. The teacher told us to press our backs flat against the wall. "No matter what you hear outside," she said, "you stay." I just did what she said. I now understand that we were practicing being hunted.

I have done similar lockdown drills 22 times since. Twelve times a year, by law, New York State requires them. At some point I stopped being scared during the drills. But now, the fact that the drills started to seem "normal" is the part that scares me most.

I attend high school in Lower Manhattan. My classmates and I know that academic excellence doesn't exempt us from participating in lockdown drills. No test score is a bulletproof vest. This is the reality of American childhood in 2026, regardless of your zip code or your GPA.

Britain's response to Dunblane was neither complicated nor incremental. Dr. North and his colleagues watched the British gun lobby deploy every delay tactic available: calls for more time, arguments that criminals would still find a way to get handguns, and even death threats.<sup>5</sup> Dr. North and his colleagues were not deterred by these tactics, and neither was the British Government.

We've known what works for a long time. The list of prompts used in past Americans Against Gun Violence essay contests documents that.<sup>6</sup> What's been missing is the willingness to act. Instead of following the examples of Britain and other high income democratic countries that banned the guns used in mass shootings, our country's response has been to drill teachers and students in getting better at hiding.

Must freedom be defined by easy access to lethal weapons? Must freedom mean that a nine-year-old learns to make himself invisible before he learns long division? Britain and other advanced countries have decided that the answer is "No." I'm sixteen years old. I've rehearsed scenarios that could well result in my own death 23 times.

Such scenarios have “never crossed the minds” of students in other civilized countries. I have lived long enough to see the difference that stringent gun control laws make.

My generation, more than any other, has experienced the consequences of our country’s gun violence epidemic. Older generations should have taken definitive action long ago to stop this epidemic. I and my fellow students should not be shy in making this point. But if older generations won’t stop the epidemic, my generation must be the one to end it. We will soon be able to vote; to run for office ourselves; and to draft, enact, and rule on the constitutionality of stringent gun control laws. And inspired by the example of Dr. North and his British colleagues, we will succeed.

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

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Hartig and Carroll Doherty, “Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11,” *Pew Research Center*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Fatal Injury Data | WISQARS | Injury Center | CDC,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed July 1, 2021, <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Jason E. Goldstick et al., “Current Causes of Death in Children and Adolescents in the United States,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 386, no. 20 (2022): 1955–56, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMc2201761>.

<sup>5</sup> North, “Gun Control in Great Britain After the 1996 Dunblane Primary School Mass Shooting: A Model for the United States,” 9.

<sup>6</sup> Past Americans Against Essay Contest prompts include, in the 2018 contest, a statement issued by the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut in June of 1968, “The time has now come that we must adopt stringent gun control legislation comparable to the legislation in force in virtually every civilized country in the world;” in the 2020 contest, the position statement published by the American Academy of Pediatrics in April, 2000, “Firearm regulations, to include bans of handguns and assault weapons, are the most effective way to reduce firearm-related injuries;” and in the 2025 contest, the opinion of the late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas in the 1972 case of *Adams v. Williams*, “There is no reason why all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police.”