



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 \$100 Winner

Submitted by a Student Attending High School in California

(Student's Name and Name of High School Withheld at Student's Request)

We Practiced Silence

“The thought of having armed guards and ‘lockdown drills’ never crossed our minds.”

Dr. North's words don't shock me - they expose a gap between his world and mine. In my school, lockdown drills are as routine as fire alarms. I remember the last time we had a lockdown drill: My teacher walked to the door, turned the lock, and pulled the blackout shade down in one smooth motion. We moved to the corner behind the lab tables, backpacks pressed against the wall. Someone's Apple Watch buzzed and they hurried to silence it. For ten minutes, no one spoke. When the announcement cleared, we went back to solving for electric potential as if nothing had happened.

We treat these drills as procedure, but they train something deeper: how to disappear.

The U.S. response to school shootings reflects that mindset. We design protocols to react, such as locking doors, hiding students, stationing armed guards - rather than eliminate the threat itself. At my school entrance, a security officer stands beside a sign-in iPad, checking IDs against a list. During lunch, we joke about who would “forget” their ID and get turned away, but the presence of that checkpoint says something more serious: danger is expected, and we are managing it. In contrast, after Dunblane, Great Britain implemented strict gun control laws that targeted access to firearms. Their response asked, “How do we prevent this?” Ours often asks, “How do we respond when it happens again?”

That difference shows up in small, specific moments. In English class, when a book falls loudly, heads turn toward the door. During passing period, I notice which classrooms have windows facing the hallway and which don't. When a substitute

The Lockdown in the Land of the Free

forgets to lock the door during a drill, someone always whispers, “Lock it,” like it’s second nature. These aren’t dramatic reactions - they’re quiet habits, built from repetition.

I don’t think students should have to develop those habits to feel safe.

The idea of adopting gun control laws similar to Great Britain’s is often framed as unrealistic, but the alternative - continuing to normalize preparedness for violence - feels harder to justify. The obstacles are clear: political polarization, debates over the Second Amendment, and cultural attachment to gun ownership. But we’ve overcome complex national challenges before by focusing on outcomes rather than divisions. If the shared outcome is fewer lockdown drills, fewer armed guards, fewer moments where a classroom falls silent out of fear, then the path forward becomes less abstract.

Students already play a role in shifting this conversation. After one drill, my friend and I stayed behind and asked our teacher, “What actually changes after we practice this?” That question turned into a class discussion about prevention versus response, about why our safety plans rarely extend beyond the classroom door. In that moment, we weren’t just participants in a drill - we were questioning the system behind it.

Dr. North describes a reality where lockdown drills were unimaginable. I can describe, step by step, exactly how mine works.

That difference shouldn’t feel inevitable..