



*A Union of Professionals*

## **Newtown: A Call for Ideas**

*(Submitted on Behalf of the American Federation of Teachers)*

We have a collective responsibility to ensure that our public schools are safe sanctuaries—both physically and emotionally—for every child, every educator and every community. That’s the first step in creating safe, nurturing, supportive learning environments where teachers can teach and kids can learn and grow.

Each of us was shaken to our core by the brutal massacre of innocent children and educators in Newtown, Conn. Two of the educators who were killed and one who was wounded are part of the AFT family. We grieve for them as we do for the entire Newtown community. Right now, as we still mourn, we have to help those in Newtown heal and we have to act. The instinct to protect, to serve and to love children is at the core of every educator and school employee. It is why educators need a critical voice in ensuring what happened in Newtown never occurs again.

Creating safe schools can’t be an empty promise. It will require a balanced approach that addresses both the physical and emotional safety of kids, educators and school employees—including comprehensive school safety programs and procedures, welcoming and supportive school environments, mental health supports and commonsense gun safety legislation.

### **School Safety Programs and Procedures**

- Every state should have policies in place requiring individual school/building safety plans and districtwide safety plans. These plans serve as a guide to address all safety needs in the school, in areas such as lockdown procedures, chain of command, evacuations, personnel assignments in crisis situations, procedures for drills or practices, and reporting procedures.
- Every school should conduct regular audits or building walkthroughs to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of their school safety and security plans.
- Audits should be designed and implemented by the entire school community, including administrators, parents, students, educators, school support staff and their unions. These same parties also should be given the chance to offer feedback before the results are publicly released.
- Appropriate state and local agencies need to devote more attention to ensuring that school communities and families are better informed about community- and school-level emergency preparedness protocols. This should include a special focus on the protocols for communication between the families of victims and the agencies responsible for incident management.
- Communication with and between students, school staff, parents, community and first responders is absolutely critical to every step and stage of safety planning and emergency preparedness. This holds true in planning and implementation of the plans as well as in the aftermath of tragedy.

- Schools should provide regular training for all school employees in their district's and school's emergency management systems and protocols to ensure that staff are able to protect and assist students during any crisis. All school staff also should receive regular training in violence prevention such as that required by New York state.
- As part of a school safety program, panic buttons or other methods of quickly contacting first responders should be available in classrooms.
- Our public schools should not be armed fortresses. Efforts to arm educators and increase guns in our schools put educators and students at risk and undermine our ability to provide a safe and nurturing learning environment for students.
- Whether to bring police officers into schools should be decided on a school-by-school basis; it should be the decision of the school community and must be part of a comprehensive school safety plan. Some schools, due to their remoteness or following horrendous tragedies such as the massacre in Newtown, may decide to have police at their individual schools. If a school decides to bring police into schools, they should be part of the fabric of the school community, not simply a stationed armed guard. School resource officers and programs like D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) provide rich learning experiences and opportunities for students in addition to being part of the school safety team.

### **Welcoming and Supportive School Environments**

- When unspeakable tragedies do occur, we must provide immediate and ongoing physical and emotional support and assistance to students, parents, educators and school employees to help them grieve, heal and feel safe once again.
- Safe and respectful environments must be created for all students in our schools. Investing in ongoing schoolwide practices to reduce bullying behavior, increasing after-school activities, and integrating community services and programs like peer counseling, wellness programs and other social supports, are just a few examples of how communities like Baltimore and Cleveland have been able to reduce school-based violence. There are many other programs (such as Peace First) that can serve as models for how communities can reduce school-based violence. Noted researchers have asserted that this type of connectedness is a key element in fostering a sense of belonging and security in neighborhoods, particularly among marginalized students.
- Programs encouraging partnerships between schools, local law enforcement and appropriate community agencies (such as mental health) must be created to prevent and reduce school violence. The program would establish the creation of school-based safety committees composed of parents, educators, student and administrators. Law enforcement and other agencies should develop ongoing relationships with school safety committees and work jointly with them to help create safe and respectful environments, prevent and address violent incidents in schools, and serve as a resource on all safety issues for the faculty, staff and student body.

### **Mental Health Supports**

- As a nation, we have a collective responsibility to help those who are suffering from mental health issues by making services more accessible. To do this, we need to reverse the recent

trend (documented below) of slashing funds for social workers and mental health services; we must let people know they are not on their own and help is available.

- States have cut at least \$4.35 billion in public mental health spending from 2009 to 2012, according to the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors. In fiscal year 2012 alone, 31 states that provided information to the association reported cutting more than \$840 million. We must reverse this trend.
- We need to establish an appropriate ratio of students to counselors, psychologists and social workers in order to ensure that children get the diagnosis, support and help they need to reduce the incidence and risk of students feeling disaffected and isolated in their schools. Parents then have a responsibility to ensure their children participate in counseling or other services recommended by school or other mental health professionals.
- Community schools offer a vehicle for how schools can best deliver a wide range of coordinated services, including mental health services. This strategy puts in place a safety net to prevent students and families from falling through the cracks. At the crux of the community school strategy are coordinated, results-focused partnerships that include both public and private entities, to provide not only comprehensive educational and developmental services, but also access to mental health services for students and families, with the objectives of improving academic achievement, building school and community engagement, and improving the skills and well-being of the surrounding community residents.
- A concentrated and sustained public campaign to destigmatize mental health issues is needed. Effective prevention hinges on the networks of support available to students and members of their communities.

### **Commonsense Gun Safety Legislation**

The AFT supports commonsense gun control legislation, including:

- Banning assault weapons and large-ammunition magazines, such as the bill introduced on Jan. 3 by Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.);
- Requirements for thorough background checks;
- Ending the “gun show” loophole; and
- Ensuring gun owners keep their weapons secure while creating or increasing penalties for those who fail to do so.

We have witnessed the violent effects of gun violence for too long—both in our schools and in our neighborhoods. The tragic massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary must be a galvanizing moment to change this. We stand prepared to not only flesh out these ideas but work with you to create safe schools and communities for everyone in America.