

Forum on School Safety
Written Testimony
Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell

Good afternoon. My name is Dianna Wentzell and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Education in Connecticut. I will begin my comments as directly as possible; I wish we did not have to be here today. I wish there was no reason to engage in this dialogue, but coming from a state that has seen the face of gun violence first hand, it is all too clear that these conversations have regrettably become necessary.

We are living in challenging times. There are political and cultural issues playing out on a national level unlike anything we have seen in many, many years. Battle lines have been drawn and the tension is rising too fast. Make no mistake, whatever the ultimate outcome, it will have a lasting impact on our country. It is time to do our part to make sure it is the right outcome.

A temporary memorial was recently created here at the United States Capitol displaying 7,000 empty pairs of shoes. It was an impactful visual image which represented the roughly 7,000 young people who have died as a result of gun violence since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14th of 2012. On that date, the hearts of all Connecticut residents broke, and I am not sure we will ever fully recover.

While we continue to grieve and get angrier each and every time we hear of another mass shooting, we have made huge strides in Connecticut under the leadership of our Governor. We now have some of the toughest gun laws in the nation, which include a ban on buying assault weapons, new eligibility rules for the purchase of ammunition, a prohibition on the sale or purchase of magazines carrying more than 10 rounds and the requirement for universal background checks. The Governor has also championed measures to increase focus on school-based diversion initiatives to reduce juvenile justice involvement among youth with mental health needs and has committed over 50 million dollars in grants to improve security infrastructure at our schools without compromising the learning environment. Passing these measures were all steps in the right direction for our state, but they will not solve this national epidemic.

The most recent shooting in Parkland Florida has left the country stunned and angered once again, but this time students from across the nation are standing up and exercising their voices to demand action from Washington. They are walking out of classrooms in coordinated protest to say enough is enough. They are standing up and fighting for the simple and obvious right to go to school without being shot, or having the fear of being shot hanging over their heads. They are literally fighting for their lives because no one else will, and no additional lives should be lost because certain lawmakers are unwilling to stand up to the gun lobby. Enough blood has been spilled. 7,000 dead children is simply unacceptable.

Schools should be places where students feel welcome, safe, and ready to learn, they should not be made into barracks or fortresses. As a lifelong educator, I know that arming teachers is also not the answer. It is dangerous, bad for the educational climate in our schools and could have a profoundly negative impact in our classrooms. When law enforcement officers descend on the chaos of a school shooting scene and there are multiple people holding guns, they will not have the opportunity to distinguish the good guy with a gun from the murderer. Our teachers did not sign up for that.

It is time to shift the national focus to what we as educators know works: increased social-emotional learning, greater access to mental health services and a commitment to restorative practices. It is time to invest in school-based health centers as we have in Connecticut. It is time to end zero-tolerance policies in our classrooms, time to stop school-based arrests that have a disproportional impact on our students of color and time to shut down the school to prison pipeline. It is time to engage parents and communities in an open dialogue and to promote positive climate in our schools. It is time to stop pretending that this problem might go away on its own. Teachers should be armed with the skills necessary to carry out this work, not armed with guns.