



January 4, 2013

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
Vice President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20501

Dear Mr. Vice President:

On behalf of our nation's elementary, middle-level and high school principals and assistant principals, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) are writing to provide recommendations for action to prevent gun violence in schools after the horrific tragedy that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT.

We commend you and the President for acting swiftly to address gun violence prevention, school safety, and the mental health and well-being of our nation. We are pleased that the effort is multi-faceted and includes input from stakeholders in the mental health and education communities. Our nation's educators, including principals, teachers, and other school personnel, such as school psychologists and counselors, are deeply committed professionals who work tirelessly to address the safety, social, emotional as well as cognitive needs of students each day. Principals, in particular, are unfortunately too familiar with the circumstances that we believe led to the tragedy at Sandy Hook. Research indicates what principals and mental health personnel already know -- that those students most at risk for delinquency and violence are those who are most alienated from the school community. As such, the principals leading our nation's schools are in a unique position to help our country take the proactive steps that are necessary to prevent another gun-related incident that could potentially take the lives of additional children, youth and adults.

As our country mourns the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School and the taskforce seeks ways to prevent such horror from recurring, principals join many of the nation's leading experts from the research, mental health and school communities to call for meaningful, long-term solutions. Principals believe that we must do better as a nation to address the mental health and well-being of our citizens, support safe and secure schools through bullying and harassment prevention programs and support for partnerships between local law enforcement and schools, as well as ensure that each school has appropriate school personnel to work with children whose health and well-being may be at risk -- beginning in the earliest years. Principals strongly believe that the community-school partnership is a unique and vital feature of American education system, and one that must be strengthened to create effective gun violence intervention and prevention. Recently, many well-meaning policymakers have proposed shortsighted measures, such as allowing teachers and principals to carry firearms in schools. As the professional organizations for our nation's 100,000 principals, we strongly oppose such policies (see NAESP and NASSP statement enclosed).

The principal's first responsibility is to foster a safe, orderly, warm, and inviting environment where students come to school ready and eager to learn. To be effective, schools must be operated *and* perceived as safe havens. Research and countless studies have shown that the presence of armed school personnel, increased numbers of school resource officers (SROs), as well as the purchase of other visible school security equipment will not necessarily deter the kind of violence that took place at Sandy Hook.

In light of the latest research on effective practice that educators know will lead to safe and healthy schools and communities, we ask that policymakers take preemptive measures to strengthen the ability of schools to provide coordinated services in mental health and school safety at all levels of government. Principals believe that there should be strong collaborative relationships between the school, the community, and local service providers. Principals – on behalf of their schools and communities – need unfettered access to programs, supports and services when it comes to responding to threats on the health and safety of students directly, as well as prevention and intervention before a student’s behavior escalates to violence and threatens the safety of others. Principals believe the federal government must do more to encourage local education and community health system cooperation, and remove barriers to effective service delivery. There is a strong national interest for the federal government to set the standards so that all professionals in schools, mental health and law enforcement can work together to provide services for students and families, especially young children, when the need is identified.

Most educators, particularly principals and teachers, are able to recognize the signs and symptoms of troubled students that are known to lead to violent behavior, and pinpoint interventions working with their colleagues in mental health. More and more, principals are identifying students who may need intervention in the earliest grades, often with an overwhelming number of cases as early as kindergarten. Unfortunately, principals and other school personnel find themselves hampered by inefficient systems that prevent them from helping students and families access appropriate mental health and well-being services. As the taskforce considers policy and related proposals regarding gun violence prevention, NAESP and NASSP offer the following recommendations:

- Create a federal inter-agency coordinating council led by select agencies including the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Justice and Homeland Security.
- Dedicate a nationwide public education and awareness campaign about the mental health needs of youth and adults, which are often shortchanged or neglected. The campaign would be led by the inter-agency coordinating council and include a summit to bring together stakeholders from the mental health, education, and justice and law enforcement communities to discuss issues, and identify long-term solutions to prevent gun violence, particularly among youth in our nation’s schools.
- Remove barriers between education and local health service agencies, and encourage local communities to focus on schools as the “hub” for service delivery. Local communities must be encouraged to break down the silos between community health and education systems in the interest of school safety. NAESP and NASSP believe that all partners and stakeholders in the success of our education and community health systems must work together toward the common goal of keeping our schools and communities safe. Communities, states, and the nation generally have made only marginal strides in creating and supporting an infrastructure that provides all children and families with services that are connected to the school communities. In many cases, principals are simply unable to get students and families access to services that are needed even when the appropriate programs exist in the community.
- Create clear policies to support principals to build partnerships with community mental health service providers and local law enforcement. Principals need to be able to maintain relationships that are essential to keeping students safe, and have the means to hire appropriate mental health personnel in the school, such as guidance counselors and psychologists. As a nation, we do not do enough to give schools the resources to maintain evidence-based programs designed to address school violence, student conflict, and common mental health issues.

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- Bolster federal programs to prevent bullying and harassment in our nation's schools, which will have a dramatic impact in improving school safety and, correspondingly, student achievement for all students. Specifically, the federal government must support education, health care, civil rights, law enforcement, youth development, and other organizations to ensure that:
 - Schools and districts have comprehensive and effective student conduct policies that include clear prohibitions regarding bullying and harassment;
 - Schools and districts focus on effective prevention strategies and professional development designed to help school personnel meaningfully address issues associated with bullying and harassment; and
 - States and districts maintain and report data regarding incidents of bullying and harassment to inform the development of effective federal, state, and local policies that address these issues.
- Give states and local communities the ability to combine federal and state funding streams that flow from separate agencies where mental health and school safety can be addressed, and encourage community-based mental health organizations to work in cooperation with local law enforcement, schools, and other key community stakeholders to create a system of community-based mental health response and threat assessment. These efforts should promote wellness in schools, including how to address mental health needs of students and all community members, and allow for quick coordination in order to respond to potential threats to community safety.

Principals understand that they bear responsibility in all of these goals, particularly in their work to help all students succeed. In fact, many states, districts, schools and communities are successfully working in the areas described, but more work is needed to expand and build on the success. As the taskforce considers policy proposals, we believe it is necessary to bring together stakeholders from the education, mental health and wellness, and law enforcement communities together, not separately, for additional discussion on solutions to gun violence prevention.

As the national representatives of principals from grade levels spanning P-12, we are supportive of the taskforce's efforts to take a close look at the issues related to gun violence and protect the health, safety and well-being of all citizens, especially in our nation's schools. We look forward to working with you through focused discussions, forums, and events, as well as enacting sound policies.

Thank you for your consideration of the comments herein on behalf of our nation's elementary, middle, and high school principals and the millions of children they serve.

Sincerely,



JoAnn Bartoletti
Executive Director, NASSP



Gail Connelly
Executive Director, NAESP

cc: The Honorable Arne Duncan, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education

Enclosure

MEDIA RELEASE



National Principals Groups Oppose Proposals to Arm School Officials

Firearms in principals' and teachers' hands might do more harm than good

December 19, 2012; Reston, VA— In the aftermath of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, we all feel a desperate need to honor the memories of the victims and take steps to prevent such horror from happening again. In that spirit, many well-meaning policymakers are proposing to allow teachers and principals to carry firearms in school. As the professional organization for our nation's principals, we strongly oppose such policies.

A principal's first responsibility is to foster a safe, orderly, warm, and inviting environment. To be effective, schools must be perceived as safe havens where students want to be. The presence of armed school officials on campus conveys the opposite message to students and to the local community. Is the school really safe, a parent might wonder, if the principal feels that he or she needs to carry a firearm? Any impression that obstructs a trusting relationship in school compromises school safety instead of enhancing it.

That compromise would perhaps be necessary if arming teachers and principals actually made schools more secure. We believe, however, that such policies will not produce the intended effect—and they might do more harm than good. NASSP School Safety Specialist Bill Bond, who experienced a school shooting as a principal in 1997 and who has assisted in the aftermath of just about every school shooting since, reminds us that most of these incidents happen very quickly and last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes. Bond's close examination of each shooting incident reveals a complex series of decisions that a school official would have to make to eliminate the threat while still safeguarding the school. It is not reasonable to expect that a school official could intervene in a deadly force incident, even with a modicum of training, quickly and safely enough to save lives.

Yet even the slightest hope of saving lives bumps up against another well-researched reality: gun-related violent behavior is closely connected to local access to guns. If we increase the number of guns in schools—no matter how carefully we safeguard them—we can expect an increase in gun violence.

Sadly, there is no simple solution to this complex problem, regardless of whether the perpetrator is a student or an outsider. But we know that there is something schools and communities can do. It has been identified time and again by the Secret Service, the FBI, and numerous researchers as the most effective way to prevent acts of violence in schools: build trusting relationships with students and others in the community so that communication flows freely among public agencies

and threats come to light quickly. We need policymakers to support and promote collaboration among community-based mental health organizations, local law enforcement agencies, schools, and other key community stakeholders to create a system of community-based mental health response and threat assessment. These efforts should promote wellness in schools, including how to address the mental health needs of students and all community members, while responding to potential threats to community safety. Schools also need to have the means for appropriate personnel and programs to establish positive connections with the community.

The solution is a matter of school culture. It's a matter of community engagement and coordination. It's a matter of public health. It's a matter of funding for school resource officers. And yes, it's a matter of gun access. The real solution is multifaceted and complex, but as with most complex problems, the simple and obvious solutions often fall far short.

About NASSP

[The National Association of Secondary School Principals \(NASSP\)](#) is the leading organization of and national voice for middle level and high school principals, assistant principals, and all school leaders from across the United States and 36 countries around the world. The association provides research-based professional development and resources, networking, and advocacy to build the capacity of middle level and high school leaders to continually improve student performance. Reflecting its longstanding commitment to student leadership development as well, NASSP administers the [National Honor Society](#), [National Junior Honor Society](#), [National Elementary Honor Society](#), and [National Association of Student Councils](#).

About NAESP

Established in 1921, the [National Association of Elementary School Principals \(NAESP\)](#) serves elementary and middle school principals in the United States, Canada, and overseas. NAESP leads in the advocacy and support for elementary and middle-level principals and other education leaders in their commitment to all children.