

Never again

Randi Weingarten, President
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I will never forget a march last summer through the streets of Pittsburgh, calling for better, smarter investments in public education. As Mei-Ling Ho-Shing—a student who had lived through a school shooting—addressed the crowd, the nearby Pirates game kicked off with a crack of fireworks, and Mei-Ling froze. I rushed to her, realizing that this amazing young woman would forever carry that tragedy with her.

Mei-Ling is now a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., where 17 students and staff were killed one year ago. She was already active in the Black Lives Matter movement and gun violence prevention, and she has become even more so. She helped plan a Student Gun Violence Summit in Washington, D.C., last fall, where students from around the country drafted a Students' Bill of Rights for Safer Schools and Communities.

In the 12 months since the tragedy at Stoneman Douglas, nearly 1,200 children have been fatally shot in the United States. In the two decades since the rampage at Columbine High School in Colorado, more than 187,000 students have been exposed to gun violence at school. A majority of American teens say they are worried about a shooting happening at their school. Let that sink in. America is utterly failing our youth.

Mei-Ling's generation is fluent in the shorthand of school massacres—Columbine, Sandy Hook, and now Stoneman Douglas. They're done with our national paralysis on this issue. Young people are demanding meaningful action beyond "thoughts and prayers." They know, as do law enforcement officers and educators, that there are effective ways to address gun violence, such as "red flag" laws—temporary court orders to stop at-risk individuals from accessing firearms, which could have prevented the Parkland tragedy. D'Angelo McDade, a 19-year-old shooting survivor and executive director of Chicago anti-violence group the Peace Warriors, nails it: "Young people are the secret weapon to reforming our nation."

Many adults are allies in this cause—like Abbey Clements, a second-grade teacher at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. During the 2012 shooting rampage that claimed the lives of 20 first-graders and six staff at Sandy Hook, Clements whisked two students into her classroom from the hallway—and the line of fire—then returned to shielding her students. In the years since, as some, including Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, have proposed arming teachers, Clements has denounced this risky and ineffective tactic. "This is not the movies," she says. "It's school."

While school shootings are rare, more can and must be done to prevent them. This ranges from improving the physical security of schools by installing internal locks and limiting entry points in schools, to enhancing social and emotional supports by providing more counselors and other wraparound services.

But schools can't do this alone. Last week, the AFT, the NEA and Everytown for Gun

These actions are effective and have public support. It's time for children and common sense to take priority, not the National Rifle Association's fearmongering that claims every gun safety proposal violates the Second Amendment. Frankly, policymakers who put campaign contributions from the NRA and gun manufacturers ahead of Americans' safety are complicit in this crisis. Teachers will continue to speak out against

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Safety called on lawmakers to implement strategies proven to help enhance school safety and reduce gun violence, including:

- **Red flag laws**, which temporarily restrict people's access to guns when there are clear warning signs they pose a threat to themselves or others;
- **Responsible firearm storage laws**, to make it harder to access the most common sources of guns used in school shootings: the shooter's home, friends and family;
- **Background checks on all gun sales**, to keep guns out of the hands of people who shouldn't have them; and
- **Raising the age to purchase semi-automatic firearms** to 21, to prevent minors from easily getting their hands on the most lethal weapons.

these warped priorities. That's why we joined a lawsuit to investigate why the Education Department is more focused on arming teachers than funding mental health services in schools. And that is why we are grateful that the new leadership in Congress recently held the first hearing in years on gun violence prevention.

Last week, I joined teacher leaders from around the country to be with the Stoneman Douglas community as the shootings' one-year mark approached. Teachers told me how they were supporting students and each other. Mei-Ling updated me on her college applications. For all the signs of normalcy, I know that the heartache, fear and anger never go away. So many have lost so much to gun violence. We owe it to them to do everything we can to make schools and communities safer.



Weingarten with student Mei-Ling Ho-Shing at a rally for public education in Pittsburgh.

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