



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
AFT Higher Education
AFT Public Employees
AFT Nurses and Health
Professionals

March 14, 2018

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U.S House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Dear Representative:

Lorretta Johnson
SECRETARY-TREASURER

On behalf of the 1.7 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, I write to express our support for H.R. 4909, the STOP School Violence Act of 2018. We are glad that the bill's sponsors and House leadership agreed to prohibit using funds to arm teachers—namely, to purchase firearms and train individuals in the use of a firearm. The AFT supports bans on both assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, expanding and improving the background check system, encouraging the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct research on gun-related deaths and rescinding the gun industry's immunity. Congress must listen to the public and respond as Australia did and pass commonsense gun violence prevention laws. We urge you to heed the cries of the students from Parkland, Fla., and their peers from across the nation and take the additional, meaningful steps outlined above to put an end to gun violence in our schools. The nation is watching and waiting for Congress to act.

Mary Cathryn Ricker
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Our collective responsibility is to ensure that our schools are safe and welcoming places of teaching and learning, not armed fortresses. Creating safe schools can't be an empty promise. It will require a balanced approach that addresses both the physical safety and the emotional well-being of students, educators and school employees—an approach that includes comprehensive school safety programs and procedures, welcoming and supportive school environments, mental health supports and commonsense gun safety legislation. To this end, much more work needs to be done, beyond the STOP School Violence Act.

The AFT calls on Congress to provide the resources to fully staff every school in America with qualified mental health professionals who can identify and intervene before students reach a crisis point. The House must also invest in ongoing schoolwide practices to reduce bullying behavior, community schools, after-school activities and programs like peer counseling, wellness programs and other social supports that are crucial steps toward reducing violence in schools. Congress cannot simply pass an omnibus bill that provides funding for the STOP School Violence Act while ignoring needed increases for crucial education and mental health programs. We must stop attacking problems only after the fact—prevention is a far more effective solution.

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.



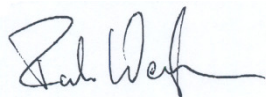
If funds are allowed to be diverted to private schools, a change from current law under the STOP School Violence Act, we must make sure there are enough resources provided to address the needs of all schools and that discrimination is not allowed. It is concerning that under this bill, federal funds could be directed to schools that can potentially discriminate against students, as private schools lack the robust oversight and enforcement of federal civil rights protections overseeing public schools. This language must be addressed in conference negotiations with the Senate.

I encourage Congress to hear the concerns of parents, students and educators about over-policing in schools. Profiling outside of the school building, and disproportionate expulsions and suspensions within the school building, are serious concerns, and ideas like arming school staff or creating anonymous reporting systems—without due process—are problematic. As with gun violence, much more needs to be done to address these valid concerns. Most immediate, if the bill moves to conference, language should be added to require grant recipients to collect data on those identified through an anonymous reporting system, as well as subsequent referrals to law enforcement, to help identify any disproportionate application of the system toward students of color, students with disabilities or LGBTQ students, and language should be added to require grant recipients to provide redress opportunities for students who are erroneously flagged for threats of violence.

AFT members see the tragic results of gun violence every day. We are haunted by the stories our members have told of the horror that was visited upon Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School and other schools upended by gun violence. Passage of the STOP School Violence Act would be a good step, but much more needs to be done to address the gun violence facing schools and communities. If the House refuses to consider commonsense gun violence reduction measures, then it will fail to put forth the kind of strategies we need to end this growing epidemic.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Randi Weingarten". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Randi Weingarten
President

RW:emc opeiu#2 afl-cio