

Katrina Kickbush, Teacher
Baltimore, MD
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Protecting Children from Gun Violence

Sen. Stabenow and members of this committee, thank you for this opportunity. My name is Katrina Kickbush, and I am a special education teacher at Wolfe Street Academy, in Baltimore, Md. I have taught prekindergarten through eighth grade in a wide variety of educational institutions, including private schools, special education settings, and, currently, the Baltimore City Public Schools, where I serve as our school's building representative for the Baltimore Teachers Union, an AFT affiliate.

Twenty-four years ago, I made the choice to become a teacher because I see education as the foundation of positively shaping the next generation of America's citizens. Schools are supposed to be places of warmth, growth and learning, where children are allowed and encouraged to act their age, make mistakes and become the people they will be. A place where students' hidden talents and deep passions are nurtured and encouraged.

But this world of children, a world of safety, a world of trust, stands in jeopardy. Because of the lack of commonsense gun laws that place the value of a child's life below that of individuals who wish to purchase and carry weapons designed for mass destruction, our children face daily reminders that their lives could come crashing down around them. We have to ask 4-year-olds not only to prepare to read but also to prepare for an active shooter seeking them out.

Multiple times each year our students must perform lockdowns as if any one of them might be the real thing. In that moment when the code word is announced throughout the school, the goal of every individual in that building is no longer the development and growth of young children. The goal becomes staying alive, keeping others alive. Each teacher walks toward the door, removes the magnet that keeps our constantly locked doors from latching all day. We cover windows so no one can tell if there are people in the room, hoping that if we are quiet enough, a shooter will pass us by. Our students are trained to move to an identified location in the room. This is the place where, if a shooter decided to shoot through the door, through the window, or through the sheetrock wall, the bullets would be least likely to hit them. We take attendance. We note the name of the child who went to the bathroom. We hope that he and all the other children who were moving through the building find the closest safe place to hide. Then, we wait. We don't open the door for anyone. We stay silent. We pray.

A building that is designed for life and joy, learning and exploration, is silent. Often, in the younger grades, students are cuddling up next to their teacher just to feel some sense of safety.

This is not just hypothetical. Two years ago, while students at my school played on the playground, two men were shot and killed directly across the street, on the steps of the home of one of our families. Hearing the shots, the teacher huddled the students in a corner, hoping that the shooter had accomplished his goal and would pass them by. The building went on lockdown while police scoured the neighborhood looking for the perpetrator. As the scene was secured, students cried and hugged their friends, and parents made their way to the school. While comforting students and families, staff members had to deal with their own personal responses as well.

Those moments immediately after a shooting are only the first step in a process of recovery, a process that has become more and more a process of acclimation to a new reality. The following day, attendance is low and hours are spent helping students and families make sense of what happened, helping them rebuild some sense of safety.

After the most recent mass shooting in Florida, my own 15-year-old daughter asked me what I would do if a gunman entered my school. I turned the question around and asked her what she thought I should do. She thought a moment and then responded, "Mom, I really want you to come home. But I know you. You love your students and you couldn't live with yourself if you didn't try and save them." It makes me sad, it makes me angry, that I am being put in the position of having to make the impossible decision of protecting my students and colleagues or being there to see my own child grow up.

Unfortunately, some feel that gun laws need to be changed so that more guns are placed in schools, more bullets to threaten others, including arming teachers. Everything I have said today, and everything for which I entered teaching, stands against arming teachers. We are trained to be compassionate, patient and encouraging. We willingly have taken on additional duties due to lack of funding such as being a parent, social worker and mentor. Now I'm being asked to be an armed guard? That is not a school where I want to teach. That is not a school I want my students to attend. I have made the decision that I will do everything in my power to protect my students. I will stand with them in the face of an intruder. But this is not a decision I or any other educator should have to make.