K-12 Organizations Urge the Senate to Protect Students & Families by Reinstating a Strengthened Federal Assault Weapons Ban and Passing Legislation Prohibiting Older Youth from Purchasing Military-Style Weapons

Dear Majority Leader Schumer and Minority Leader McConnell:

As the leading national education organizations committed to building safe learning environments and ensuring that every child can grow and reach their full potential, we strongly urge Congress to reinstate a strengthened federal assault weapons ban as quickly as possible. For the first time, firearms are now the leading cause of death for children under the age of 19.\(^1\) Many more children and youth experience trauma and other adverse effects of exposure to gun violence. We cannot wait. While the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act makes some necessary improvements to existing gun laws, we must not stop there.

At a minimum, we urge Congress to pass legislation preventing children and teenagers from accessing dangerous weapons by passing the Age 21 Act (S. 4278) which would increase the minimum age from 18 to 21 for purchasing certain military-style assault weapons and high capacity magazines from a federally licensed gun dealer, as well as limit the private transfer of certain military-style assault weapons, high capacity magazines, and handguns to those who are age 21 or older. Many of our nation’s horrific school shooting tragedies – from Uvalde to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School to Sandy Hook to Columbine and beyond – may have been prevented through federal legislation setting the standard for purchase and transfer of deadly firearms. Congress must take action now to prevent future tragedies in our communities and make it harder for firearms to land in the wrong hands.
December 14, 2022 marks the 10-year anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, where a 20-year-old gunman with an AR-15 style semi-automatic rifle claimed the lives of twenty children between the ages of six and seven, as well as six adults – the school psychologist, behavior therapist, principal, and three teachers. We have witnessed in horror as military-style weapons have been deployed against children and educators learning and teaching at school, against families exercising their right to worship, against seniors shopping, and against communities celebrating together. In the aftermath, we work to rebuild communities that are shattered, comfort children haunted by fear and memory, and carry those families whose children will now never have the opportunity to grow into adults or who may live with the trauma of bearing witness to, being injured in, or even the daily threat of violent events involving an assault weapon, let alone a firearm, occurring in their own school community.

Make no mistake, assault weapons serve no purpose of sport or personal protection. These weapons of war were specially designed for military use to inflict extreme widespread damage, and they do not belong in the hands of civilians.

Gun violence prevention advocates have called for increased restrictions on civilian access to military style weapons of war for decades. Congressional inaction has resulted in countless and entirely preventable tragedies including the school shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas; the racially motivated shooting in Buffalo, NY; and the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. In each of these instances a teenager legally purchased a military style assault weapon to carry out these horrific acts of violence.

We believe that every student deserves to learn and grow in an environment that is safe. But we are at a crisis point. According to a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, “the United States is alone among peer nations in the number of child firearm deaths. In no other similarly large or wealthy country are firearm deaths in the top 4 causes of mortality let alone the number 1 cause of death among children.”  It is urgent that families, educators, school district leaders, community leaders and elected officials work together to prevent violence in schools and ensure that all students have a safe environment in which to thrive and learn.

The original assault weapons ban that sunset in 2004 was passed on a bipartisan basis by Congress as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 with the support of law enforcement and colleagues from across the aisle. Then and today, the majority of Americans – Republicans and Democrats – continue to support common sense gun safety measures such as limiting access to military-style weapons. Research demonstrates that gun laws that restrict access to high-powered weapons that are capable of mass destruction in a short period of time reduce gun related deaths. Multiple empirical studies demonstrate a significant rise in mass shootings following the expiration of the ban, and state laws limiting magazine size are associated with a nearly 50% reduction in fatal mass shootings.
We strongly urge Congress to protect students and families from weapons of war by reinstating the federal assault weapons ban and, at a minimum, passing legislation like the Age 21 Act (S. 4278) prohibiting older youth from purchasing military-style weapons. No one should fear for their life by simply going to school or going about their daily lives. Together, we can build a safe learning environment where every child has the opportunity to grow and reach their full potential.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or would like to discuss further with us, please contact Kate Clabaugh, National PTA Director of Government Affairs, at kclabaugh@pta.org.

Sincerely,

American Federation of Teachers
American Federation of School Administrators
American School Counselor Association
National Association of School Psychologists
National Education Association
National PTA

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