

Statement of Joseph (J.T.) Lewis
Before the Federal Commission on School Safety
U.S. Department of Education
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Thank you all for giving me the opportunity to speak to this commission on school safety. I'm thankful to share my voice and ideas where they might be useful.

Before I give you my thoughts on how we can make schools safer, I wanted to tell you about my day on December 14th, 2012.

The day started out like any other, and I figured it would end the same way. Going home and having an elaborate, detail filled conversation with my mom about my school day.

She'd ask, "How was school today, honey?"

I'd respond, "Fine."

But instead, I found myself huddled with my classmates, in the back of a classroom, exchanging what little information we could find on our phones.

Someone got a text that said there'd been a shooting at the nearby Elementary school.

I remember one friend actually start to choke up, and almost cry, " My sister is at that school! I hope she's okay!"

Maybe it was my naive 12-year-old mind, but I told him to stop overreacting. Everything was fine. The text was wrong. Those kinds of thoughts hadn't crossed my mind. Yet.

Then the details started coming in. Still stuffed into the back of a cold, dark Spanish classroom, every one of our faces were illuminated by our phone screens. We were on news sites, Twitter, Facebook, anywhere where we could find out what was going on.

Soon, as rumors became confirmed, we started to realize how serious what had happened at the Elementary school really was. There was a death toll. Most of us recognized the names.

As soon as the lockdown at the middle school had ended, I was picked up by a family member and chauffeured to the now-famous fire house. This is where families gathered to find out if their children and parents were alive or not.

About an hour into the wait someone casually walked over to our family and told us that we fell into the category of “not”.

Every time there is a mass shooting, seemingly quite frequently, at school or elsewhere, the first thing you hear is, “Wow, no one should have to go through something like that.” Then they go about their lives and forget. And then another shooting happens, sometimes only a week or two later, and again we hear, “Wow, no one should have to go through something like that.”

My point is, this committee, this administration, has the opportunity to do something special to put a stop to these shootings.

In the years following the shooting we met with the former Secretary of Education. We met with Governors and Senators. We even met President Obama. The whole time hoping

someone, anyone, would help us stop these senseless killings. No one helped. The shootings continued. Nothing changed. They accomplished nothing.

These politicians could never veer from their party's anti-gun agenda to actually make schools safe. Our country is built on the foundation of the 2nd Amendment. Our right to bear arms isn't about hunting. It's about protecting ourselves and those we love when our government can't or will not. Either way, there are over 300 million guns in the country. Guns aren't going anywhere any-time soon, whether we like it or not. Ready for a truth-bomb? It's been over 19 years since Columbine. That's 19 years of constant pushing for gun control - in whatever form that might look like. At some point we'll need to admit that platform has failed and move on to attainable measures.

And then President Trump gets elected and takes office. A year later, the Parkland shooting happens.

For the first time in my young life I heard a President, and entire administration that wanted to put an end to these school shootings with reasonable school safety measures. Things that could actually be accomplished. It wasn't the same old "time to get rid of guns" talking point.

President Trump recently tweeted - don't worry, it's a good one:

"History shows that a school shooting lasts, on average, 3 minutes. It takes police and first responders 5 to 8 minutes to get to the site of the crime. Highly trained, gun adept teachers/coaches would solve the problem instantly, before police arrive."

Many schools, including mine, have former police or military as teachers who could safely store a gun in their classrooms, only to be used in a the case of an active shooter. My recent

coach and teacher was a former Navy seal. If there was a shooting at my high school, I'd want him armed.

The much less divisive path, but also more expensive, is to have an SRO or armed guard, preferably two, in every school. The schools in Newtown are now some of the safest, most secure in the country. That's because, after the shooting, our schools implemented measures like armed guards. They're not doing that for show. They're doing it because it works!

Unfortunately, because I'm not a big government type of person, the government does need to get involved in some way. Schools are legally not responsible for the safety of their students. The Newtown school system was not accountable for my brother, and they walked away without even an apology to the victims' families. The government should step in and make sure every school in America is as secure as the post-shooting Newtown schools are.

Some argue that putting armed guards in schools makes them feel like prisons. This is a ridiculous argument. After 9/11, airports added extensive security. At first it felt odd, but after time passed people grew used to the additional security because it was for their own safety. The same is true with schools. We can implement armed guards and in time we will grow used to it because it's for the safety of our nation's youth.

Three of the most recent school shootings, in Florida, Maryland and even yesterday in Illinois, were stopped by a School Resource Officer. They were able to quickly apprehend the shooters in all three cases. There was one death combined between those shootings. That, compared to Newtown, Parkland and Columbine where there were a combined 56 deaths and countless more injured. Obviously having a first line of defense inside our schools works.

President Trump said, at a recent NRA rally, "There is no sign more inviting to a mass killer

than a sign that declares ‘this school is a gun-free zone.’ I couldn't agree more - it's just common sense. I'll just throw this stat out there, 98% of mass shootings occur in gun-free zones. Take that information however you will.

How hypocritical it is that many of our politicians go around with a full security detail, armed to the teeth, while our kids are sitting ducks in outdated and unprepared schools. What if those same politicians valued the lives of our nation's youth as equally as their own? The President said it best, “ We must harden schools.” It's that obvious. It's that simple.

The idea that an armed guard is the best way to fight an armed intruder is hard to argue against. In fact, I've talked with politicians and media on both sides of the aisle and privately, the idea has lots of support, more than enough to get something of substance passed in Congress.

So to sum this up, what do I think schools should do to keep kids safe? Put in two armed guards in every school. Whether they are armed teachers, retired police or military or active police.

Simple measures like anonymous hotlines to report threats seem as obvious as they are necessary. If you ask, and I have, most kids will tell you that they can identify “the next shooter”.

Make sure every school is only accessible through a single entrance. All side entrances should be locked from the inside. This way, in the event of a shooter, you know exactly where they are. We must defund failed programs like the Promise Program, that allowed the Parkland shooter to walk free and kill 17 people. Finally, schools must start to take responsibility for the safety of their students. Parents are starting to wake up to the fact that when their kids are at school, they, the parents, are solely responsible for their safety. Soon,

they will demand that change! And I will stand with them when they do.

I look forward to continuing to work with this commission and this administration to stop these mass shootings. Thank you for having me speak today.