

Statement of Scarlett Lewis
Before the Federal Commission on School Safety
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, DC

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Good afternoon Commissioners. Thank you for the opportunity to offer a solution to the violence we are experiencing in our schools today. My name is Scarlett Lewis and I am the mother of Jesse McCord Lewis who was a victim of the Sandy Hook School shooting. I am also the proud mother of JT Lewis who will be addressing you next.

I decided to become part of the solution following the brutal murder of my 6 year old son, Jesse, in his first grade classroom at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December, 2012. Jesse was shot in the forehead by Adam Lanza, a former student, alongside 19 of his classmates and 6 educators in one of the worst mass murders in US history. The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was preventable, as are all the others. I'm going to be talking about the solution today-how we can proactively prevent school violence, stopping the issues before they start.

Until now, the focus on school safety has been based on external safety measures such as active shooter protocols, single point entries, bullet proof film, arming school resource officers, etc. External safety measures are extremely important due to the reality of our schools literally being 'under fire.' This, however, does not address the CAUSE of WHY a student would want to harm an educator or another student.

I often hear people refer to Adam Lanza, our school shooter, as someone who just, 'snapped.' We like to think people snap because, what can we do to prevent a snap? But in reality, it's never a snap. It's always a long, slow steady burn of pain, disconnection, isolation, lack of resilience, and emotional management that results in school violence. For Adam it was a lifetime of pain and neglect.

The Sandy Hook Advisory Commission report was released 2 years after the shooting to determine how something like Sandy Hook could happen, and what we can do to make sure it doesn't happen again. They were given unprecedented access to Adam Lanza's school and medical records, interviews, and other data. The report states the attack on Sandy Hook Elementary appears to have been, "a purposefully thought out and planned attack - Adam Lanza did not just "snap"." And this is a hopeful statement because there is always something we can do to help ease another's pain. In other words, we can prevent school violence.

Addressing the symptoms of the issues has been our modus operandi and leaves us always a step behind the problems, in reactive mode, while the issues continue to escalate. In wanting to become part of the solution, I realized we have many issues in our schools today that then plague our society. These are related to school violence and we have been addressing these same issues for decades. Still they continue to escalate. In addition to violence there is substance abuse, mental illness, and bullying, for example.

Drug overdoses now kill more people than cars and guns combined and are expected to escalate over the next 5 years. There is no plan other than to pour tax dollars into addressing the symptoms. We have a mental health epidemic in our schools. The Child Mind Institute reports that 49 ½% of our youth will have had a diagnosable mental illness by the time they're 18. The majority of that diagnosis is anxiety. The average age for the onset of anxiety is 6 years old. 70% of these kids will not get professional treatment, so they suffer alone. What do the long-term

outcomes of untreated anxiety look like? Violence, substance abuse, mental illness, incarceration, suicide, depression, etc. in schools, that then manifest in our society.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, bullying has increased in our schools by 21% since we started tracking it in 2003. Bullying continues to get worse despite state-mandated programs and laws we have created through our reactive nature that focus on the issues. My son was murdered by a bully, who had also been bullied in school.

When we treat the symptoms without addressing the CAUSE, we will never get ahead of them. And we haven't.

I applaud our First Lady Melania's courage to endorse social and emotional learning as part of her "Be Best" campaign. This is a *dramatic change* from how we have dealt with issues in the past, until now. Social and Emotional Learning is a proactive and preventative approach that addresses the CAUSE of these issues that scientific research shows proactively reduces and prevents substance abuse, mental illness, bullying and violence.

Social and Emotional Learning teaches kids how to get along, how to have healthy and positive relationships, deep and meaningful connections, skills and tools for resilience, emotional management, conflict resolution and responsible decision making, among other qualities. In fact these are all things that employers value most, over and above IQ.

When researching a solution for what took my son's life, I was heartened to find that there is one! It's called Social and Emotional Learning! In fact, I've dedicated my life to spreading awareness of the SOLUTION to the issues our children face and that face our society and I've made it my life's mission to make sure that every child has access to what we know, through decades of research, is in the

best interests of every child as well as the future of our society. If Adam Lanza had social and emotional learning in school, my son and the other precious little children and educators would be alive today. This is backed up by the years of research that went into the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission report as well as the Child Advocate Report.

In fact, the donors who support the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement believe so strongly in the life transforming and life saving potential of social and emotional learning that we are able to offer our PreK-12th grade comprehensive social and emotional learning program called the “Choose Love Enrichment Program” to all educators and students at no cost. There is no excuse not to do this.

I’m going to read some excerpts now from the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission report as well as the Child Advocate Report that were released after the Sandy Hook massacre:

‘While all students benefit from a concerted focus on social-emotional learning, for students struggling with mental health and/or developmental disorders, inadequate supports for social and emotional wellness and a lack of attention to SEL can have particularly deleterious consequences. The report issued from CT’s Office of the Child Advocate...emphasizes the striking absence of social-emotional learning in Adam Lanza’s educational records...Despite the centrality of social, emotional and behavioral health challenges to Adam’s identified disabilities, his Individual Education Plan was directed almost exclusively towards supports for his academic progress. For example, a quote from the child advocate report states “attention to Adam’s severe disabilities focused on curricular issues rather than on the social and emotional characteristics that were seriously impacting his ability to participate in a regular educational environment.” The Child Advocate’s investigation concluded that, “the absence of a plan to address Adam’s social-emotional issues...likely... contributed to a situation in which he eventually

became increasingly withdrawn and socially isolated.”

The Child Advocate Report specifically asks, “Is there a reluctance to serve youth’s social-emotional learning needs in schools?” Here is its recommendation: **Schools must have capacity to address social-emotional learning, offer evidence-based social skills curriculum, skill building regarding social pragmatics... and other supports.**

ALL of the scientific evidence shows that children that have social and emotional learning get better grades and test scores, higher attendance and graduation rates, better classroom and school climate, increased positive relationships and connections, less stress and anxiety, less behavioral issues, and less bullying! There is research now that has followed kindergartners all the way into adulthood that found kids that had social and emotional learning have less substance abuse, less mental illness, of all kinds, less incarceration, less violence and even less divorce rates! Decades of scientific research prove this and it makes common sense as well. Columbia University did a study that found for every \$1 invested in SEL, there is an \$11 net present value return to the community. I can’t think of a better investment than our most precious asset, our youth.

So, as Melania has proposed, we must be proactive and preventative in our approach to violence in our schools. If we continue to be reactive, we will always be one step behind, as we have been, and these tragedies will continue, unabated. We can proactively prevent school violence as well as substance abuse and mental illness by implementing social and emotional learning in our schools on a regular basis.

In the concluding thoughts section of the Sandy Hook Advisory report, it states: “As a state and a nation, we must seek out and embrace measures that will foster... resilience. All of the Commission’s recommendations...promote a broad

and holistic approach to mental health across the lifespan. Such an approach will...prioritize social, emotional and psychological wellness across our culture...”

Further the report states:

“Schools must play a critical role in fostering healthy child development and healthy communities. They should provide learning tools geared towards positive development and serve as a locus...healthy social development should...be actively taught in schools. Our educational system has prioritized children’s cognitive development at the expense of their social and emotional development, and this disproportionate focus on academic achievement threatens to become even more entrenched... Research clearly demonstrates, however, that social and emotional learning curricula have a positive impact on children’s development and actually enhance their academic progress.”

Recommendations of the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission on how to prevent another Sandy Hook School massacre state: “Social-emotional learning must form an integral part of the curriculum from preschool through high school. It works best when it is a pervasive component of the school environment that informs the culture of the school and the behavior of adult educators. Too often school administrators and teachers view SEL as secondary to academic curricula, worrying that time spent on aspects of SEL will detract from students’ academic achievement. As a result, even evidence-based SEL curricula are rarely included past the earliest grades, and where SEL is taught it rarely receives the time and attention it deserves. All schools should implement a sequenced social development curriculum.”

There is no mass murder gene. Likewise there is no SEL gene. We must learn these skills and tools and if we didn’t learn them, we don’t necessarily have them. The bottom line is this...Social and Emotional Learning is an integral part of school safety. SEL cultivates safety from the inside out by teaching kids the skills and

tools they need and that we know proactively prevent violence. This takes SEL from a 'nice to have' to a 'need to have.'

A comprehensive school safety plan MUST include social and emotional learning. External safety measures are important however they do not address the CAUSE of the violence. **The only way to proactively prevent school violence is to address the cause and provide students with the tools and skills necessary to navigate their life and future.**

The Commission's report continues ... "Comprehensive youth development can prepare young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a progressive series of activities and experiences that foster social, moral, emotional, physical and cognitive growth. In this context, a coordinated, comprehensive system of support services for all students ensure that their physical, social, emotional, and health needs are met and their school environments are safe and orderly while also promoting their optimal academic development.'

Jesse died a hero. Jesse chose to use his final moments to save 9 of his classmate's lives. When the gunman stormed into his first grade classroom, after murdering his counselor and principal in the hallway right outside their classroom door, he continued shooting until his gun ran out of bullets. It was during this short delay, and as Adam changed the ammunition clip on his gun, that Jesse yelled for his friends to run. They said it's because he told them to run that they made it to safety. We believe Jesse stayed to protect his teacher. I talk about Jesse's bravery because this is the same courage that we all have within us. We must call upon that courage RIGHT NOW and do what we know is in the best interest of OUR children. Schools MUST BE a safe haven for our children and our educators. We know what to do, now we must have the courage to do it.

Social and Emotional Learning must be a part of every school safety plan by cultivating safety from the inside out and addressing the cause of the tragedies that have become commonplace in our schools.

Thank you.