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I can't teach the future if the future is dead

*An educator's perspective on why we need gun law reform now
by Abigail Swetz, DPI communications director and former middle school teacher*

As a teacher, my most important job was to keep my students safe.

Safety is, after all, a basic need, and students cannot learn if their basic needs are not met first.

Safety is why we practiced active shooter drills in my middle school multiple times a year. We practiced because those drills were designed to prepare us and protect us; those drills were also traumatizing in and of themselves for my students, and for me. Because we knew those drills weren't enough to save us.

Let me explain what an active shooter drill looks like, sounds like, and feels like.

An active shooter drill looks dark. The lights are off. The windows are closed and the shades, if we have them, are pulled down. The door is locked, and the door's window is covered with a large piece of craft paper. Students huddle in a corner, whichever corner is furthest from and out of sight of the door, kneeling or sitting on the floor, many of them underneath tables or behind chairs.

An active shooter drill sounds silent, at first. There is the soft scuffle of shifting bodies on the floor. Then the classroom phone starts ringing over and over. It is a test; we are not supposed to answer the phone. It could be the shooter trying to locate us. Then there are knocks on the door, and the door slams a little against the door jamb; support staff call through the locked door, "It's Ms. A, please let me in." It is another test; we aren't allowed to open the door. The shooter could have taken Ms. A hostage.

An active shooter drill feels terrifying. Because terror is the appropriate reaction to a terrorist attack, and that is what school shootings are. My heart is racing as I write this. Because the reality is I knew that we did active shooter drills because an active shooter at my school was possible. I knew that, in that possibility, I would do everything in my power to keep my students safe. I knew that could mean getting shot. If a shooter was at my classroom door, I knew my blood would fall first. I knew my students would see that. I knew my body couldn't save them. I knew I would try to save them anyway. I knew it was possible that I would watch them die.

(more)

A student once told me, “I know where the exits are in every classroom. I never sit with my back to the door. I don’t think of a school shooting here as an if. I think of it as a when.” To be clear, they did not say this because we had just finished a drill, or because there had recently been a school shooting in the news. It was just an ordinary Wednesday in an American eighth grade classroom. Their hypervigilance was a trauma response. This is how we are raising generations of children. We are raising them in trauma. Not because we are training them through active shooter drills, although they are traumatizing; we are raising them in trauma because we are raising them in a country where elected officials in charge of reforming laws see a classroom of dead children and teachers and then do nothing to protect the next classroom of students. Because a classroom is not safe in a country that is not safe, and a country with such easy access to guns is not safe. Maybe this time will be different. Maybe this time leaders will listen to the voices of the dead. But they shouldn’t have to die for their leaders to listen.

As an educator, as a public policy advocate, as someone who has spent my career listening to students and trying to keep them safe, I call on every elected official, from every party and at all levels of government, to protect our children. I call on them to enact strong gun law reform. Robust reform is how we keep our children safe.

Our children are our future. Our educators prepare them for that future every day. They can’t teach the future if the future is dead.

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