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The Honorable John J. Faso
United States Congress
House of Representatives, 19th District-NY
721 Broadway
Kingston, NY 12401

April 18, 2018

Dear Congressman Faso:

On behalf of the New Paltz Central School District, we thank you for your letter dated February 21, 2018 in response to our Board of Education President, Michael O'Donnell regarding the tragic mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018. Like many school districts across the nation, the New Paltz Central School District recently convened a safety forum to bring our families, school administration and local law enforcement together to meet, share our profound concerns around gun violence and strengthen our action plans for school safety.

In your letter, you express your support for a number of legislative actions in an effort to prevent gun violence, and specifically school shootings:

- Fix NICS legislation,
- Review existing background requirements and close gaps in the current system,
- Regulate semi-automatic weapons that function as automatic ones with similar restrictions,
- Ban bump stocks, and
- Raise the age for purchase and possession of semi-automatic weapons to 21.

These measures are long overdue and they must be pursued with urgency. But they are not nearly enough.

Your letter also solicited our "thoughts as to how school security can be enhanced." Taking direction from our own New Paltz Chief of Police, Joseph Snyder who also serves on our District's Safety and Wellness subcommittee, we understand that the most effective safety measures are ones taken to disrupt or prevent a shooting from happening in the first place.

On the February 27, 2018 edition of Washington Journal on C-SPAN,¹ you spoke on gun control and school safety. We are alarmed by your over-emphasis on mental illness as a causal factor of gun violence in general. This misperception unfairly and inaccurately stigmatizes those suffering with mental health issues. Consider the work of the Consortium of Risk-Based Firearm Safety, leaders in the mental health profession dedicated to evidence-based proposals to prevent gun violence: "While most violence is not committed by individuals diagnosed with a mental illness, factors such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and violent behavior are strongly associated with perpetration of violence."² The consortium's research-based recommendations seek to "expand firearm prohibitions to include groups of people who meet specific, evidence-based criteria associated with increased risk of committing violence."³ Closing gaps in the current system should include Gun Violence Restraining Orders

¹ C-SPAN Washington Journal. [video file]. February 27, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?441590-3/washington-journal-representative-john-faso-discusses-gun-control-school-safety>

² Consortium for Risk-Based Firearm Policy. "Guns, Public Health and Mental Illness: An Evidence-Based Approach for State Policy." December 2, 2013. <https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/publications/GPHMI-State.pdf> (accessed March 19, 2018).

³ *ibid.*

(GRVOs) or Extreme Risk Protection Orders, which prohibit firearms in the hands of those most likely to use them to inflict harm as the Lautenberg Amendment attempts. Had such an order been in place for the Parkland shooter -- who displayed a known history of violence towards himself and others, and specifically harassed women -- he would not have been legally able to purchase firearms.

You also repeated that crimes are more often perpetrated by those with guns obtained illegally. This is a misstatement, and a grievous one with respect to school shootings. Please refer to Mother Jones Magazine's ongoing research tracking mass shooting data: of mass shootings from 1982-2012, three-quarters of the shooters obtained their firearms legally.⁴ And during that time period, more than half of those weapons used high-capacity magazines, were semi-automatic, or both; 48 of those 143 weapons would have been outlawed by the Assault Weapons Ban of 2013.⁵

You penned an op-ed on the occasion of Justice Scalia's passing, lauding Scalia's majority opinion in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008), the landmark decision which expanded previous regulation around the Second Amendment. As the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission — a 16-member panel of law enforcement officials, educators, mental health specialists and other experts — asserts, “...although a divided (5-4) United States Supreme Court held in [Heller], that the Second Amendment right to bear arms is a personal right, it also held the right is not absolute. The Supreme Court also acknowledged in Heller that society has the right to regulate gun ownership, possession and use within constitutionally permissible limits [...] The Commission believes that “assault weapons” like the AR-15, as well as large capacity magazines (“LCM’s”) often used with those weapons, have no legitimate place in the civilian population [...] By contrast, the Commission finds that the significant benefit to society from eliminating civilian ownership and possession of assault weapons and LCM’s can be realized with only a minimal burden on persons who want to hunt, engage in target practice or use weapons for self - defense. They remain free to engage in those activities with a vast array of long guns and handguns.”⁶ It is finally time to consider that semi-automatic and fully automatic firearms are weapons of war and among those Justice Scalia himself might rightly deem “dangerous and unusual”⁷ — and therefore subject to federal regulation.

Congressman, renew the ban and support H.R. 5087, the Assault Weapons Ban of 2018.

Finally, fund and publish research undertaken by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to understand fully the public health consequences of firearms by making it a direct focus and overturning the Dickey Amendment. Although firearm violence is one of the leading causes of death in the United States, it is also one of the most poorly researched, according to a January 2017 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. “In relation to mortality rates, gun violence research was the least- researched cause of death and the second-least-funded cause of death after falls,” the study's authors wrote.⁸ But when gun violence has been researched by private institutions like the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, evidence shows a clear connection between gun ownership, gun availability, and homicides.⁹

Congressman Faso, this is what you can do in Congress to help keep our children safer:

- Support Gun Violence Restraining Orders (GVROs),
- Support enhanced and universal, mandatory and complete background checks to include all gun sales and parallel tracking to include data on those with domestic violence restraining orders and convictions,
- Support H.R. 5087 the Assault Weapons Ban of 2018, and
- Support H.R. 1478 the Gun Violence Research Act and overturn the 1996 Dickey Amendment.

⁴ Mark Follman, Gavin Aronsen and Deanna Pan. "A Guide to Mass Shootings in America." Mother Jones, March 10, 2018. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mass-shootings-map/> (accessed March 19, 2018).

⁵ *ibid*.

⁶ Sandy Hook Advisory Commission. Final Report. March 6, 2015. http://www.shac.ct.gov/SHAC_Final_Report_3-6-2015.pdf (accessed March 19, 2018)

⁷ *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008), pg 2. <https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/07pdf/07-290.pdf> (accessed March 19, 2018)

⁸ David E. Stark and Nigam H. Shah. "Funding and Publication of Research on Gun Violence and Other Leading Causes of Death." January 3, 2017. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2595514> (accessed March 19, 2018)

⁹ "Firearms Research: Homicide." Harvard Injury Control Research Center. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hicrc/firearms-research/guns-and-death/> (accessed March 19, 2018)

Our constituent voices -- including those of our very own students, as evidenced by the unprecedented national walkout action of March 14 -- are further amplified by the recommendations of the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, a current and growing group of national organizations of academics, educators and mental health professionals sponsored by the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education.¹⁰ All of us see the prevention of gun violence in the United States in terms of a public health crisis. The Center for Disease Control includes "Prevention" in its namesake and purview. Gun violence as a public health crisis demands a focus on improved tracking of patterns of root causes and behaviors, raising public awareness of risks, and modification of environmental risk factors -- and federal funding to substantiate informed recommendations that lead to congressional action.

Here are our thoughts: we need to think less of "hardening schools" and to do more to gather research and information to meet and act on this public health crisis effectively. In the absence of robust federally-supported research on gun violence, our elected representatives give unjustified persistence to misperceptions, the consequences of which keep our communities in fear and in danger.

As a constituent school district, we appreciate and look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

Michael O'Donnell, President
Board of Education
New Paltz Central School District 19th District - New York

Maria C. Rice, Superintendent of Schools
New Paltz Central School District 19th District - New York

Connie Hayes, Director of Pupil Personnel Services and Special Education
New Paltz Central School District 19th District - New York

Joseph Snyder, Chief of Police
New Paltz Police Department 19th District – New York

¹⁰ <https://curry.virginia.edu/prevent-gun-violence>