

Dear Committee Members,

We are trustees on the Okemos Public Schools Board of Education, and we urge you to take action in support of the proposed gun safety legislation. In the span of nine days in February, schools in our district had to close four times due to gun violence. We've had more gun violence days off than we've had snow days. One of our elementary school playgrounds was the site of a gun related suicide by an individual not connected to the district. Nine year old children at recess discovered the horrific and bloody scene. Those children will forever be scarred by that event. The next day, Okemos High School was the victim of a terrifying swatting incident that led to 1400 high school students and their educators fearing for their lives and being escorted from the building by officers with rifles. All of our students and staff at the other buildings in the district – preschool to middle school – were also in lockdown fearing their school was under active attack. While we were incredibly lucky that this turned out to be a “hoax”, our students, teachers, staff, and administrators experienced severe mental trauma from that event. Trauma that will undoubtedly stay with them forever. To them, that moment was real. Our Superintendent ran into the high school, alongside Ingham County Sheriff Wrigglesworth, believing they would find dead kids and an active shooter. Just as our community was beginning to recover and kids were trying to feel safe in school again, the unspeakable events occurred at Michigan State University where a single gunman was able to end the lives of three individuals and critically wound five more including an OPS alum. MSU is our neighbor. Many of our graduates are on that campus, many of our parents work at the university, and many of us know at least one of the victims. The horror we've seen other communities suffer through hit very close to home.

We are writing to you today imploring you to take immediate action to curb school shootings and gun violence. According to Sandy Hook Promise, guns are now the leading cause of death for American kids and teens, and each day 12 children die from gun violence in the US. So far this year, Americans have experienced more than 100 mass shootings resulting in 149 deaths and over 400 injuries. Okemos Public Schools has been lucky that our students haven't become part of the statistics, but we live in fear that our luck will run out. As school board trustees, we have sat through enough disciplinary hearings to know that much of that “luck” is dependent on parents doing the right thing and locking their guns up and making them inaccessible to their children. It is dependent on fellow students doing the right thing by bringing safety concerns and online threats to adults and administrators.

You, our legislators, have the power to take steps to increase our “luck”. We are asking you to take action to keep guns out of the hands of individuals who may want to harm themselves or others. Extreme risk protection order laws and safe storage laws will help prevent suicides, shootings in domestic violence situations, and mass shootings in places such as schools. Laws holding gun owners responsible if their guns are used in a crime, such as the case at Oxford High

School, would deter gun violence. Expanded background checks will go a long way to keep guns out of the wrong hands.

As an example of how these laws could work in keeping our students and educators safer, consider this hypothetical situation: a student makes an online threat to bring a weapon to school to murder a classmate and then themselves over a perceived slight. During the investigation of the student and the situation, law enforcement discovers the two-household family has firearms at the homes of both mom and dad. According to Sandy Hook Promise, 4.6 million American children live in homes where at least one gun is kept loaded and unlocked. We have to hope that the parents in our hypothetical situation take the case seriously enough to lock the weapons up in ways that secure them away from the troubled student. A safe storage law could prevent this student from accessing the family weapons by mandating that they must be securely stored, but also by making those parents liable in the event their weapons are used to hurt or kill someone. We also have to hope that the student, who is well versed in how to use a weapon since the family enjoys target shooting, really doesn't know where the gun safe key is hidden or the combination to the lock. In this case, an extreme risk protection order would go even further in preventing a shooting by allowing law enforcement, who are aware of the facts of the case and the risks in the household, of petitioning to have all firearms temporarily removed in order to keep the student and others safe. None of the proposed legislation are extreme. In fact, they are common sense ways to keep our communities safer.

Our children are afraid to go to school. Our teachers are afraid to go to work. This cannot continue. As parents and as leaders of our district, we each hold our breath when we see an ambulance or police car with sirens on, watching to see if they turn towards our schools. We don't know how to comfort our children when they say they are worried about a shooter coming to their classrooms. How can we ask our teachers to sacrifice their lives for our kids? How are guns more important than our children?

Please vote to make change so that Michigan is safer for our children.

Sincerely,

Katie Cavanaugh and Jayme Taylor, OPS Board of Education Advocacy Committee