

Mass Shootings Stun Nation's Classrooms
What Congress, Schools Are Doing To Keep Children Safe

By Brian Yancelson, Co-Editor In Chief

Thirty-Two in Blacksburg, Virginia. Twenty-Six in Newtown, Connecticut. Seventeen in Parkland, Florida. Thirteen in Columbine, Colorado. These numbers are more than statistics. They are lives lost at the mercy of bullets fired by a gun, all at school while children were simply trying to learn.

"Honestly, I'm kind of numb to it now because it's occurred so much and it's been normalized in society," sophomore Ellie Badger said. "When it does happen elsewhere, I believe it's 100 percent possible that it can occur here just as much as it could any other school."

This year, the high school hired School Resources Officer Brian McManis, a full time police officer to patrol the campus during the day. Students will see him in the hallways during passing periods and it won't be the only change they notice. At the front door, visitors and students must buzz in through a ringer outside which has a camera, and the secretary in the front office monitors the camera and must let people in the building. These additions are among the many things the district is doing to keep students safe, but some changes will not be publicized to maintain a sense of security and privacy.

"I have deep sadness and anger about why these people want to hurt others," McManis said. "It's unfathomable. I've been a campus officer for six years and I can't imagine if that happened at my campus. It's truly one of my worst nightmares. I've gone through lots of training to prepare myself mentally, which will be invaluable if anything were to ever happen, heaven forbid."

Some changes are more noticeable than others, but those that are felt and seen across campus have thus far impacted how students feel at school.

"The resource officers we have had definitely helped," senior Jake Forey said. "I think as annoying as the door locking thing can be, it's probably good. It's not perfect, but I feel like with the resource officer, the doors and the cameras we just invested in also, I feel a lot safer."

On Feb. 27, the United States House of Representatives, now controlled by Democrats, passed the Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2019 with a vote of 240 to 190. The bill requires a background check be administered on all gun sales, including private sales online or at gun shows (according to a Brakkton Booker article in *NPR*, Feb. 27, 2019.) Some exceptions to this legislation are background checks not being required for transfers between close relatives, and guns can be loaned at a shooting range or for hunting as long as the gun is not suspected to be used to commit a crime. Another bill passed by the House includes extending the allotted time the F.B.I. has to conduct background checks from three to 10 days. Currently, if the F.B.I. needs more than three days to conduct a background check, a buyer can go to the dealer on the fourth day and get his or her gun, even without a completed background check (according to a Maureen Groppe article in *USA Today*, Feb. 28, 2019). That current law allowed Dylann Roof to purchase a gun and proceed to kill nine people at a church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. This recent legislation provides the most significant gun control measures passed by Congress in more than two decades. However, the House-passed bills must now go to the Republican held Senate, where gun control legislation may have a tougher time passing.

"I don't believe in any gun control," senior Drew Austin said. "I believe in stronger background checks, like preventing people who are mentally ill or have criminal history from having firearms, but I think that all regulations on guns should not be infringed upon as said in our Constitution. It is our Second Amendment right and God given right."

Some argue that a way to curb school shootings would be to arm certain teachers within a school with firearms. Teachers would have to either volunteer or be selected and then undergo intensive training to carry a gun in the classroom. Locally, East Central Independent School District recently held panels and forums to discuss implementing the Guardian Plan, which gives Texas school boards the freedom to decide on rules concerning firearms and arming employees. The idea created a tense situation, with many vocal supporters and dissenters. The district posted an online survey to get feedback, with 636 votes for the plan, 665 against it and 77 neutral. Internally, 338 faculty members supported the plan while 261 opposed arming employees (according to a Krista Torralva article in the *San Antonio Express News*, Jan. 7, 2019). There are currently no plans or discussions in Alamo Heights to arm teachers. However, McManis was asked about the topic in general.

“I think trained teachers with certifications and background checks could make schools safer,” McManis said. “It might make it a challenge [for police to detect the real shooter], but that would all be part of the training.”

Despite the plethora of mass shootings in the United States, including several at schools, one that seemed to turn the tide increasing public conversation on the topic was the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in 2018. Nikolas Cruz, a 19-year-old former student of Stoneman Douglas, killed 17 students and staff with a semi-automatic assault-style rifle. In the aftermath of the shooting, students from Stoneman Douglas were extremely outspoken in fighting for change in gun control legislation, establishing the organization known as March For Our Lives that fights to prevent another school shooting. They launched a summer long tour across the country, even making a stop in San Antonio, hosting student-led panels and discussing what was next when it came to gun control.

“My mom is involved in Moms Demand Action, so she was one of the people who influenced me to get involved, and I’m also involved in

Students Demand Action,” freshman Coco Poye said. “We had some Parkland survivors there, so I got to talk with them a little bit more and we got to have a lot of Q&A sessions, so that was really cool to hear their perspective. I think it’s important to talk about this issue, and a lot of people don’t want to talk about it. For all the young people, try to get involved in these issues, try to go hear your Congress member speak, try to hear everyone’s perspective because you might change your view and we need to focus on this issue as a whole, not just as one party issue, but as a bipartisan issue together.”

In many mass shootings, there were warning signs ahead of time. In Parkland, Cruz had been suspended multiple times and police were called to his home many times. In the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, the suspect had been in a 10-month F.B.I. terrorism investigation. Apart from all that the school is doing, students, teachers and parents can all be a part of the effort to keep the school safe.

“It sounds cliché, but if you see something, say something,” McManis said. “If someone’s out of character, making threats, even if they sound like jokes, let someone know. I was a freshman in high school when Columbine happened, and it hit me hard. I was scared, but I knew I wanted to be a police officer, and that was a driving force for me to always protect children.”