

Urge Your School Board to Act on School Safety

As students, the last thing that we should have to worry about is gun violence in schools, yet fall 2021 was one of the least safe semesters on record. Incidents of gunfire on school grounds increased dramatically in the 2021 back-to-school period; between August and October, there were 89 incidents of gunfire on school grounds in the United States—nearly triple the previous high of 33 during the same period in 2019.

Every single instance of gunfire on school grounds shakes a community and makes it hard for students and teachers to feel safe in school—and if students don't feel safe, then it's much, much harder for them to learn. We don't have to live or learn this way, so we're taking action. It's far past time for the people in power to address common-sense policies and programs that are proven to make schools safer. Utilize the following toolkit to learn about school safety solutions and urge your school board to act on school safety.

School Board Advocacy

What is a school board? School Boards, or Boards of Education, are governing bodies responsible for public education within a community. Boards typically operate at the district or county level, and work to serve the students and families who attend public schools by implementing state and district policies, managing the budget for schools, and setting goals for the quality of education, among many other responsibilities. Most importantly, school boards are tasked with representing the community's values and beliefs while prioritizing students' success and safety in school.

Who sits on the school board? School boards typically consist of three to nine elected officials who are members of the community. They can be parents, doctors, religious leaders, school alumni, former school staff and just about anyone you can think of who lives in your community. It's likely that you and your classmates will recognize the names of some school board members in your area. School board positions are usually nonpartisan, and a main requirement of being a strong school board candidate is to have a vested interest in the success of the schools and students represented.

Why school board advocacy? School boards are the building blocks of politics in the American system, which ranges from local politics, like Mayors and City Commissioners, to state affairs with State Representatives, Senators, and the Governor, all the way up to the federal level where the President and Congress operate. Local politics is the ideal entry point for young community members to engage in advocacy work. Change often happens the most quickly at the local level, and young people can have the most impact as community members and direct constituents of their community leaders.

As students, you are key stakeholders in the work that school boards do, whether it's approving your curriculum, determining the budget for the upcoming school year to purchase supplies or hire and pay staff, or enforcing health and safety guidelines in your school, the decisions that school boards make impact students' daily lives.

School boards and gun safety. Student safety is a priority for school boards, so gun violence prevention and school safety fits directly into their line of work. School boards have the power to pass resolutions, disseminate information, and spark change that can impact the actions of other districts and superintendents, and ladder up to other state government action. Gun safety is a top tier political issue;

when the various levels of government see students advocating and communities and schools leading the way on this issue, we can expect action from more partners in more places.

What if my school isn't affiliated with a school board? Traditional boards of education represent schools that are members of the public school system, but if your school is independent or private, it doesn't mean that you can't advocate for school safety. Many of the tactics and topics covered in this toolkit are applicable to advocating directly to school administration, like your principal, or an independent school's administration/board, which may include a president, vice presidents and directors each responsible for specific facets of school operations.

School Safety Solutions

While this toolkit is centered on advocating for solutions to the gun violence that happens on school grounds, the horrifying truth is that far more students experience gun violence at home or in their communities than at school—and this gun violence impacts students' ability to concentrate, learn, and succeed in the classroom. To build safe, positive school environments where students can thrive, we need to address gun violence wherever it affects students.

The following four solutions have been identified as opportunities for students to enact tangible, impactful change in their schools through school board advocacy. Read more about all of the school safety strategies that Students Demand Action supports in Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund's School Safety [Fact Sheet](#) and [Report](#).

Before choosing one solution to focus on, think about your school's student body and the issues they face, where your school is located, past circumstances related to gun violence in your school or area, and the types of gun violence that most impact your state. All of these factors and more should be considered in order to ensure that the solution that you're advocating for will have the greatest impact on your school and campus community.

Secure Storage Resolutions. With a surge in firearm sales and first time gun owners over the past year and a half, we've seen the number of children living in homes with unsecured firearms increase to 5.4 million children, up from 4.6 million six years ago. Coupled with the fact that in incidents of gunfire on school grounds, up to 80 percent of shooters under the age of 18 got the gun from their home or the homes of friends or relatives, the threat of children getting access to firearms and bringing them to school is greater than ever.

Evidence strongly suggests that [secure firearm storage](#) is an essential component to any effective strategy to keep schools, students, and communities safe. [Secure storage](#) not only decreases the likelihood of gun violence on school grounds, but also reduces firearm suicide rates and prevents unintentional shootings by children and teens. Students Demand Action groups can contribute to school safety in their district by [demanding their school board pass a secure storage resolution and send letters about secure storage home to parents](#). As of December 2021, [more than two million students nationwide attend schools with firearm storage awareness policies](#).

Increased Mental Health Support. To make a change in the safety of our schools and students, school districts need to [invest in the social emotional wellbeing of students](#). It can be challenging for

students to meet with the school counselor or therapist because there are not enough of them—and this need is often exacerbated in under-resourced communities.

School-employed mental health professionals serve as a critical resource for students as they navigate the education system and the challenges of emotional and social development. These professionals may also be among the first to know when students are experiencing problems or when they are at a risk of turning to violence.

Students can spark culture change in school boards simply by putting the topic of mental health front and center. While there often isn't a quick solution to increasing mental health support in schools, students can advocate by highlighting:

- the impact that the pandemic had on youth mental health,
- the impact that fear of gun violence in schools or continued cycles of violence in communities has on students' wellbeing and educational performance,
- the increased risk of gun violence in schools as a result of the pandemic,

and more to suggest that school boards allocate funding toward investment in students' social and emotional health.

Reconsider Active Shooter Drills. Everytown For Gun Safety Support Fund's study with Georgia Tech showed that active shooter drills involving students in schools are associated with significant and lasting increases in depression, stress and anxiety, and fear of death among students, parents and teachers. Active shooter drills are traumatizing a generation of children, and there's little proof that these drills help save lives.

Schools need to do what it takes to keep students, educators and staff safe, while balancing their well-being. Students can advocate for a reconsideration of how active shooter drills are conducted with an emphasis on preparedness exercises that involve teachers and school staff and investing in proactive school safety measures such as threat assessment/crisis response programs, a trusting and supportive school environment, and physical security upgrades. At least 40 states require some sort of active shooter drill and students can advocate that:

- Drills should not include simulations that mimic an actual incident;
- Parents should have advance notice of drills;
- Drills should be announced to students and educators prior to the start;
- Schools should create age and developmentally appropriate drill content with the involvement of school personnel, including school-based mental health professionals;
- Schools should couple drills with trauma-informed approaches to address students' wellbeing both during the drills, and over a sustained period thereafter; and
- Schools should track data about the efficacy and effects of drills.

Integrate Community Violence Intervention Programs into Schools. In neighborhoods that experience community violence, schools have a variety of programs they can support to mitigate violence and its impact on youth. These programs provide on-site accessible and culturally competent services to young people in order to reduce violence among those most at-risk. The U.S. Department of Education recently released [guidance](#) clarifying that \$122 billion in K-12 ARP funds may be used for Community Violence Intervention (CVI) strategies, and additional [guidance](#) on other federal education resources available to support CVI. Examples of these programs include;

- **Safe Passage Programs** provide safe routes to and from schools to reduce student exposure to gun violence. Schools, law enforcement, and communities collaboratively implement protocols and procedures to ensure student safety. In Chicago, incidences of crime along Safe Passage routes experienced a 32 percent reduction for aggravated assault and battery.
- **School-based Violence Prevention Programs** provide students and school staff with information about violence, change how youth think and feel about violence, and enhance interpersonal and emotional skills. These programs often use cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Chicago's Being a Man (BAM) program has reduced juvenile justice system readmission by 80 percent.
- **Youth Engagement and Employment Programs** support students outside of the classroom. These programs often center healing or personal development. For example, [The TraRon Center](#) helps youth gun violence survivors in Washington D.C heal through art therapy after class. Programs focusing on youth employment also show success; Boston's Summer Youth Engagement Program found participants' violent crime arrangements were reduced by 35 percent. School boards can ensure students most at-risk of gun violence are connected to these opportunities by working with the program and deferring students.

Together these programs offer wraparound services to students coming to-and-from school, students in the classroom, and students outside of it. For schools facing issues of community violence and interpersonal violence among students, students can advocate that:

- Students learn best when they feel safe and supported by both their city and community leaders.
- There is a need for students to receive services provided by culturally competent community organizations.
- Community Violence Intervention Programs have been shown to effectively reduce youth violence, criminal behavior, and violence on school grounds.

Urge your school board to learn about Community Violence Intervention Programs in your area and ensure that schools are connecting the students most in need of these services to these opportunities, distributing information about programs that operate outside of school hours, and partnering with violence intervention organizations inside of schools.

Prepare to Advocate

Learn about your board. Set yourself up for success by [learning about your school board](#). This includes everything from researching when and where meetings are regularly scheduled, who the representatives are, what the processes for creating change consist of, how meetings are typically organized, how to secure speaking time on the agenda, where to submit topics for consideration, and more. The more well-versed you are in the workings of the board, the smoother it will be to advocate for change when the time comes.

Utilize your connections. Teachers, school administrators, and parents may be knowledgeable about the way the board functions, how to be added to the agenda, or might even personally know a board member. Personal connections and those more familiar with the systems can be extremely beneficial when navigating advocacy work.

Attend board meetings. By attending school board meetings regularly, you're not only familiarizing yourself with the processes of the board, but also demonstrating interest in and commitment to the issues at hand. Not every meeting will cover items related to school safety, but all meetings have a direct impact on students. If young people show an investment in what's happening at school board meetings, the adults in the room will take notice.

Even people who run for school board with the interests of students at heart can get wrapped up in outside influences. Ensure the school board remembers who their decisions impact by being visible members of the community and demonstrating that you care.

Monitor meeting agendas. Students are busy and can't be expected to attend every single school board meeting. Monitor the agendas to ensure that if something related to school safety is being discussed, student representatives can attend the meeting and speak up for student interests.

Email board members. Emailing board members is another way to demonstrate that you are invested in their work. If you're just beginning your advocacy work, sending emails to introduce yourself, state your role in Students Demand Action, and explain why you're interested in advocacy work at the school board level is a great way to open lines of communication and build relationships that can be beneficial in the long run.

Present the solution and campaign to your group. Advocating for school safety solutions is a great project in which everyone in your group can participate. At a group meeting, share some information about the campaign and gauge your group's interest in putting it into action. Through the campaign, group members will learn about solutions to prevent gun violence in schools and be empowered to advocate to the school board for impactful change.

Know the facts. As your group prepares to advocate to the school board, educate yourself on the [school safety solution](#) in which you are focused, statistics around [gunfire on school grounds](#), the issue of [guns in schools](#) at large, and [gun violence in your state](#).

[Everytown Research](#) has endless resources on gun violence in America. Spend time exploring the website as all issues within the gun violence prevention movement are interconnected—for example,

a report on city gun violence might provide information to support your argument to integrate School-Based Violence Prevention Programs.

Advocacy Tactics

Invite a school board representative to speak at your group meeting. Talking directly with school board members can set your group up for success as you begin to navigate your advocacy campaign. Not only is it beneficial to develop a relationship with a school board member, but they can also provide your group with valuable information such as how school board meetings are typically run, which tactics are most likely to have an impact on board members' decisions, and which members will align with you right away versus which will take more work to sway their vote. Your group can also practice advocating to this representative and ask for feedback on the presentation. Be sure to ask the board member any questions you have about school board processes or your campaign, if they're taking time to speak to your group, they are an ally and are looking to support you.

Speak at a School Board Meeting. After your group understands the processes in which change occurs, contact the necessary parties to secure a spot on the upcoming agenda.

There are different ways to present your case to the school board, including individual verbal testimonies, group testimony, distributing fact sheets to the board, or a group presentation with a slide deck of the facts and your argument. In advance of the meeting, your group should be well prepared and all students who are presenting should know their role. Email students@everytown.org for support including fact checking and feedback on testimony.

Identify stakeholders. As Student advocates, you are key stakeholders in the effort to make schools safe from gun violence. It may be helpful to identify additional credible messengers who are able to speak at the school board meeting to support your point of view. Some examples of key stakeholders may be survivors of gun violence, school faculty, community violence intervention workers, child psychologists, pediatricians, and Moms Demand Action volunteers who are parents in the school system.

Circulate a digital petition to demonstrate support. Digital petitions are amazing tools to demonstrate community wide support for a gun safety solution to the school board. Email students@everytown.org to request a digital petition. Prior to emailing Students Demand Action, work with your group to develop an audience for the petition and goals around the number of signatures you would like to collect. For example, will you utilize your petition to demonstrate student support, or will the petition be opened up to the entire community, including teachers and parents.

Once a petition has been created, the work to collect signatures begins. Some tactics for collecting signatures include tabling at school or community events, including your petition in the school announcements or email newsletters, encouraging classmates to sign before or after classes, posting on social media, and sharing the link with the Moms Demand Action volunteers or other adult connections in your community for them to share in their networks. Be creative with collecting signatures and set up a meeting with students@everytown.org for help brainstorming additional tactics.

Organize an Email Campaign. Draft sample email templates supporting your goal, [compile the email addresses of board members](#), and distribute the information to members of your Students Demand Action group, other clubs, your classmates, or the student body at large. Email students@everytown.org for assistance in writing sample email language or to fact check the email that your group drafted. Remind the students who are sending emails that school board members are elected to represent students, so they should voice their opinions and concerns frequently. Sometimes, just one email to each board member from several students will demonstrate valid support, under other circumstances, you may need to recruit larger numbers of students to send emails or students may need to be more consistent sending an email multiple weeks in a row. Evaluate where each board member stands on your issue to determine what frequency of email will be most effective in getting the member to vote on your side.

Write letters to the editor or a group op-Ed. Publishing your voice is a powerful way to educate the public about your campaign and urge the school board to take action. Letters to the editor (LTEs) are short (150-250 word) pieces made up of a strong lead off statement about the issue and why it matters to you and/or the audience, two to three sentences supporting your argument with data and facts, and a call to action conclusion. Your group can schedule a meeting to individually write LTEs in support of your campaign and submit them to the school newspaper and other local media outlets. Similarly, op-Eds follow the same format, but in longer form and allow for more space to elaborate on what the campaign means, why it's essential to school safety, and why your group is passionate about the issue. Work together as a group to co-author an op-Ed for your school or local newspaper.

Both op-Eds and LTEs can be emailed to students@everytown.org for support, reviews, fact checking, and help with placement.

Meet with school administration. Many of the above tactics can also be utilized at the school administration level. Some schools don't operate within a school board, meaning that administration is the best place to advocate. Other times, it makes more sense to advocate directly to school administration, allowing them to implement change at the individual school level and eventually join you as an ally as your group scales up to advocate at the school board level.

If you advocate at the school board level, and the school board doesn't pass your resolution or implement your suggestions, *keep going!* Try utilizing the same tactics at your individual school with administrators to create meaningful change.

Keep Students Demand Action Updated

We are so impressed with Students Demand Action groups' commitment to enacting change, especially when they stand up to their school boards with information and solutions that will save lives. From the first planning meeting, to the time you present to the school board *log all of your efforts* in the [create an event form](#) and post updates on social media, tagging @studentsdemand.

If you have any questions about this toolkit or are looking for support in advocating for school safety solutions, email us at students@everytown.org!