

**MARCH  
FOR OUR  
LIVES** **KY**



**MEDIA  
PACKET**



**Kentucky  
Student  
Voice Team**

# PRESS RELEASE

The Student Voice Team drew hundreds of youth activists and adults concerned about school safety to a Teach-In and rally at the Kentucky Capitol Tuesday. The events were led by high school students from across the state to highlight the issue of school violence and support participants to explore solutions.

The day of action was held in the context of recent school shootings and threats in Kentucky and across the country and correlates with the March for Our Lives national and local rallies inspired by the survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida which will take place on Saturday.

Students from geographically diverse schools shared a range of experiences and perspectives from the Capitol steps, capturing the larger debate about what to do to address the perception of a wave of gun violence and threats in the nation's public schools.

Green County High School junior, Ashton Bishop, described growing up with a casual comfort around weapons that was recently challenged when her school went into lockdown over a threat. "Since that day, many people in my school and town have been on edge," she said. Just the mere thought of a gun in school has shaken me and many of my peers to our cores."

But Khamari Brooks, a senior at Fern Creek High School in Louisville, acknowledged that how schools choose to protect students may look different to different people. "How you feel about school safety depends on where you're coming from. I feel like our school needs to incorporate better security systems into schools, including metal detectors, more cameras, better security technology, but I have friends who don't agree." Austin Bowman, another senior from Fern Creek, underscored the point. "Of course, I agree that our schools need to be safe, but I don't want us to transform our schools into fortresses. I feel like metal detectors, or more police officers, or teachers with guns, that doesn't make me feel any safer," he said.

Many of the students participating in the Student Voice Team's day of action plan to continue organizing others around school safety and climate issues, and they are actively soliciting organizations to expand that work. The Kentucky League of Women Voters, Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, Student Alliance for Mental Health in Action, Marshall County-West Kentucky and Lexington March for Our Lives, LIFT Kentucky, National Alliance for Mental Illness Kentucky and Jack Be

Nimble have committed to that partnership. They agree that a focus on limiting inappropriate access to guns like the one used in Parkland; ensuring better mental health resources; implementing effective, fair, and consistent school discipline policies; and a sustained commitment to building social and emotional capacity among students and staff are some essential first steps to stemming school violence.

Nasim Mohammadzadeh, a sophomore from Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Lexington and one of the rally emcees emphasized that the process of problem-solving around school safety is critical. “It is okay that we don’t yet all agree on what needs to be done about violence in our schools,” she said. What is most important for now is that we grapple with the issue together, as a civil community that cares about our schools and that includes young people in the discussion.”

Student Voice Team director, Rachel Belin said that the way students are tackling issues of school safety provides a model for the larger community. “The stories students shared today show that the reality and prospect of violence in our schools have become a threat to learning at high levels. But the way students are organizing themselves, learning about the issues, and helping to educate and mobilize others to respond should give us hope. As these young Kentuckians prove, students clearly are, and need to be, part of the solution to whatever afflicts the climate and culture in our schools.”

# ABOUT US

The Student Voice Team consists of over one hundred self-selected youth from across Kentucky. We work to integrate students as research, policy, and advocacy partners in the efforts to improve our schools. We were founded in 2012 at the Prichard Committee. Our approach has focused on amplifying student stories, from our Student Voice Audits to our published book *Ready or Not: Stories from the Students Behind the Statistics*.

With our Student Voice Audits, we pioneered a peer-led evaluation of school climate, focusing on the opinions of students, teachers, administrators, and parents collected in surveys, roundtable discussions, and interviews. We completed our first Audit in 2015 in Clark County, and are currently working on Audits at Franklin-Simpson, Magoffin County, and Fern Creek High Schools.

In 2017, we published *Ready or Not*, a book that examined postsecondary transitions. With Gear Up Kentucky, we travelled across the state and interviewed students, teachers, and parents, about what it means to be college ready. With a diverse group of stories, *Ready or Not* describes the various challenges for students across Kentucky to make the transition to college.

# **MARCH FOR OUR LIVES KY PARTNERS**

Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky

JackBeNimble

League of Women Voters of Kentucky

LIFT Kentucky

National Alliance on Mental Illness Kentucky

Student Alliance for Mental Health Improvement and Action

Lexington March For Our Lives

Marshall County-West Kentucky March For Our Lives

# RALLY SPEECHES

**Introduction & Emcees: Nasim Mohammadzadeh, sophomore, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, Fayette County; and Emmy Sippy, freshman, Henry Clay High School, Fayette County**

**NASIM:** On behalf of the Student Voice Team, thank you for joining us today at the Kentucky State Capitol, even despite the weather. My name is Nasim Mohammadzadeh, and with me is Emanuelle Sippy. We're members of the Student Voice Team, a youth-led organization that supports students as partners in improving Kentucky schools. For the past six years, the Student Voice Team has worked to amplify student stories in education decision-making, and we do so again here today.

**EMMY:** We gather here today to show Kentucky what we experience in our schools and our communities every day. We gather for safer, more empathetic, and more loving schools. We gather here today because fourteen students and three staff lost their lives at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and two students at Marshall County High School here in Kentucky have lost their lives in the past two months. The courage displayed by Douglas and Marshall County students as they raised their voices in the face of tragedy exemplifies the well-engaged citizenry our schools seek to foster.

**NASIM:** Please join us in a moment of silence for those who died at Douglas and Marshall County High Schools and for the many others who have lost their lives to guns, both in our schools and in our communities.

**NASIM:** To our fellow students, thank you for raising your voices. To our adult allies, thank you for standing with students and amplifying our voices. Today, we will hear from a wide range of perspectives--from rural students who grew up with guns in their home to city students who say they see too many guns on the streets. We'll hear from a student with autism who implores us not to blame mental illness for our problems with school safety and a student who wonders why we are quick to call some students monsters when they commit a violent act without even considering whether they could be grappling with mental illness.

EMMY: We'll hear from two students who experienced the same school shooting but who have different ideas regarding what needs to be done to protect our schools. We'll hear from students across Kentucky who speak to the ripple effect of guns in schools across America. And we'll also hear from adult allies, a police chief and an educator, who speak to the systemic problems they see behind violence in our schools.

NASIM: It is okay that we don't yet all agree on what needs to be done about violence in our schools. What is most important for now is that we grapple with the issue together, as a civil community that cares about our schools and that includes young people in the discussion.

EMMY: Concerned citizens of Kentucky, this is not a call to arms. This is a call to ears. We gather today to listen and learn.

## **KEATON CONNOR, junior, Marshall County High School**

Heath High School, West Paducah, Kentucky. December 1, 1997. Three students killed, five wounded.

Westside Middle School, Craighead County, Arkansas. March 24, 1998. Four students and one teacher killed, ten wounded.

Columbine High School, Littleton, Colorado. April 20, 1999. Twelve students and one teacher killed, twenty-one wounded.

Red Lake Senior High School, Red Lake, Minnesota. March 21, 2005. Five students and two teachers and staff killed, seven wounded.

West Nickel Mines Amish School, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. October 2, 2006. Five students killed, five wounded.

Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, Connecticut. December 14, 2012. Twenty students and six teachers, administrators, and staff killed, two wounded.

Marysville Pilchuck High School, Marysville, Washington. October 24, 2014. Four students killed, one wounded.

Marshall County High School, Marshall County, Kentucky. January 23, 2018. Two students killed, eighteen wounded.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, Florida. February 14, 2018. Fourteen students and three teachers and staff killed, seventeen wounded.

My name is Keaton Conner, and I am a proud student of Marshall County High School. I never expected to be a part of the list I just read, but now that I am, I refuse to remain silent.

I refuse to be silent, because I am forced to remember the gut-wrenching cries of a boy begging me to tell him I had seen his sister alive.

I refuse to be silent, because I am forced to remember the cold look on the face of the troubled soul who shot at my friends and killed two of my classmates.

I refuse to be silent, because I am forced to remember, every second of every day, the empty feeling that filled my stomach as I realized that I might never again hug my family.

I refuse to be silent, because children should be thankful to have an education, not thankful to make it home alive from one.

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Kentucky General Assembly, Governor Matt Bevin, Senators Rand Paul and Mitch McConnell, United States Congress, President Donald Trump: What do our lives mean to you?

This is not a mental health issue. This is not a security issue. This is not a gun issue. This is all of the above.

I demand increased funding and training for mental health treatment. I demand security measures in our schools. I demand a ban on assault rifles and large capacity magazines, or any other weapon created for the sole purpose of taking human lives.

In the wake of the Parkland shooting, a quote from psychologist Thomas Cash circulated on social media: "When my child hits another child with a stick, I don't blame the stick, but I still take the stick away."

It's time to take the stick away. To those who oppose gun control: is there really anything worth more than my life or our children's lives?

As a student, I refuse to be silent until I know this will never happen again.

**SHERMANE COWENS, senior, Frederick Douglas High School, Fayette County**

Even though we all have lost many friends to gun violence in our community, we were shocked by what happened in Marshall County and Parkland. Schools are supposed to be a safe place.

Earlier, before the shooting at my school had happened, I was with a few kids in the Commons area. It's a little breakout area, and we're just sitting there waiting during advisory period when our counselor tells us we all need to go in the classroom, and we're like, "What are you talking about?" He seemed as if he was worried, but our principal had just been on the morning announcements talking about lockdown drills, so we all assumed it was another drill. Which is ironic under the circumstances.

Then this girl came in and said there was a whole bunch of police officers and there's a stretcher. And I was like, "What happened?" The girl said, "Someone just shot himself in the neck!" And I was like, "In the neck?!" Then she said he got shot in the hand, then in the leg. They were saying that he died and everything. It was hard to just sit and be calm knowing something was wrong, but not knowing what exactly.

We had to sit in there until everything was cleared out. We couldn't use the bathroom. We had to stay in our first block. The principal got on the announcements about 30 minutes later, and he sounded like he was about to cry. I can tell that he was very frustrated.

A little bit after I first heard what happened, I called my friend to pick me up, but I was worried about a test I had scheduled later, so I didn't leave. I was like, "I have to take this test today!" But it got rescheduled, and so I eventually left. I left because I just didn't want to be at school. I wanted to go home.

I've gotten used to it. I'm desensitized to the point, if I hear a gunshot or anything, I'm just like, "okay," and keep going. But it's not okay.

I have friends that have been shot and killed, so I wasn't really scared. But I think it's a very big deal. The fact that it happened in our school really shocked me.

Just because we may be becoming desensitized to violence on our streets does not mean that we have to accept it. We need to address violence not just in our schools but in our communities.

Think about that kid—the one who brought a gun to our school. Think about his environment. What's going on in his home? Some kids have the wrong guidance.

**TE'OSHA RAGLIN, senior, Frederick Douglas High School, Fayette County**

Adults—even our own parents—just don't seem to understand how bad it's gotten. When the student shot himself in the hand in our school, I was like, this can happen at any high school. But for my mom, it was the last straw. After having a gun pulled on me while riding the bus home from school, sophomore year.

She was not playing and wanted to take me out. I was like, "Mom, I have just one semester left of high school!" When I told my mom about it, I was just chill. But my mom was in an uproar. She screamed through the phone, and everyone was looking at me.

I don't think their generation has had to deal with it as heavy as ours. Our generation is just packed with violence.

I feel like our administrators do what they can do, and I feel pretty safe in school. But finding a gun in school, it definitely keeps you on your toes because when you sit in class, you're wondering if the person next to you has one.

The kid that brought a gun to school, he said he brought it for protection, but I wonder about his intent. Who was he going to use it on? Often times before I entered my glorious high school days, I never had to worry about whether or not my life was in danger. The most I remember in middle school, were bomb threats and rarely that.

I am appalled by the tragic events that have happened over all of the years, even the ones that weren't brought as much attention as the most recent ones.

Today, students are asking adults to just listen to us. Before we start the next assignment that is due on Friday, listen to us. Instead of nagging on us about turning in the assignment late, check on us. Ask us what the reason is behind us not doing it is. Ask us is there anything that you can help us with and the answer may be just as simple as LISTENING to us!

**SHANA BERRYMAN, senior, Frederick Douglas High School, Fayette County**

Gun Violence is not just a Black issue. The Marshall shooting, that was not just a black issue. The Parkland shooting, that was not just a black issue. People treat shootings differently based on the race of the shooter.

My friends and I have lost more than 17 community friends and classmates in the past 2 years, and the rate is increasing. But because it happens in the Black community, and lower income neighborhoods, the problem is ignored. When they hear about a black person shooting, they say "Oh I'm used to that."

When people hear about a white person shooting, they seem shocked. Yet, school shooters are mostly white males. We shouldn't say that when a white person fires a gun in a school, it's due to mental illness and when a black person does it, he's a monster. We need to see the humanity in everyone.

Gun violence starts at home. Kids don't get the guns at school; they bring them from home. School leaders can only do so much to prevent these problems. It helps, however, for students and teachers to build strong relationships. Teachers need to make bonds with students in order to keep an eye on students.

You never know what a kid is going through. The student who brought the gun to our school posted a message on social media about how upset he was about losing his mom, and maybe that was a warning that he was going to hurt himself, but hindsight is 20/20. I feel bad for the kid. He made a bad choice, and he will have consequences, but I still feel sad for him.

People are judging other people more than they ever did, not just in high school but in general. And that goes back to living styles. Some people can't afford to live like you can. And some people can't change themselves because of where they're at. Nowadays, it feels that adults either just don't care about the pressure youth face, or maybe they don't even know.

It's hard to talk to friends that you see making bad choices. You can tell them hundreds of times, but they still won't listen. They often don't care that the stuff that they are doing are hurting people and it's very sad to see and hear.

People need to listen more often. There can be signs that a person is giving off that they're going through something. If people are acting a certain way that they don't usually act every day, pull them aside! Ask them why! You have no idea what a person could be going through or gone through. We have to listen to each other more and show that we care.

## **JACK BRADLEY, junior, Craft Academy, from Jefferson County**

Like everyone else, I was devastated when I learned about yet another high school shooting. Probably unlike most everyone else, I was also became really upset when I learned that the shooter was believed to be autistic and to have ADHD. Why? Because I am autistic, and I have ADHD.

There is no possible justification for what he did. There is no way to comfort the families or the students or the teachers. But there is also no justification for planting the seed that autism is the reason for this guy's actions. The reality is that people like me are way more likely to be the victim of crimes than the perpetrator. As the [Autism Society of America](#), the oldest and largest grassroots autism organization in the US, notes:

“No reliable research has found that a person who is autistic is more likely to commit violence than a person without an autism diagnosis. In fact, existing research finds that autistic individuals are more likely to be victims of violence than those without an autism diagnosis. There is no confirmation of the diagnosis of the individual arrested.”

I know that people sometimes think I'm weird because of the sounds I make or the movements I can't always control or when I can't handle the noise level or situation, so I've learned to be upfront and unapologetic about who I am. That's why I can't let this dangerous myth, based on ignorance and false stereotypes, just go by the wayside.

We may never really know Nikolas Cruz's life story or what led him to this horrible darkness. And though we may share being autistic, that's where our similarity ends. I've been incredibly fortunate to have amazing family, teachers, and therapists - every possible support imaginable so that my future will be nothing like his, with the horror and heartache he created. But you can't see that when you slap a single label across my forehead.

Now my upset is turning to anger too - like the righteous anger of the Stoneman Douglas High School students who are demanding an end to the real insanity. It's the insanity of people who, along with the craziness of their unacceptable and intellectually destitute arguments against change, belittle anyone who may be different or atypical in some way.

I refuse to use labels like “deranged monster” or “maniac”. Mental illness is just that - an illness, and Cruz's unspeakable rampage is not simply the act of a mentally ill person. It is the act of a mentally ill person who had access to weapons. That our

leaders continue to allow this access is what really deserves to be labelled "insanity".

I live with a different form of insanity every day. It's the insanity of ableism (think "racism" or "sexism"), of being not quite different enough but still not fitting in; the insanity of having to battle just for a level playing field; the insanity of always having to work to fit into a "neurotypical" world and never having that world instead adapt to me - even for a single moment.

In the parallel universe where many kids like me live, we are basically invisible. We go down the halls of our schools unseen, unheard, uninvited. It is time for the world to do a little adapting - to see us, to hear us, and to invite us into the conversation for changing school cultures. That is why I am raising my voice and joining the chorus of my peers from across the political and diversity spectrum.

**ALLISON TU, junior, Dupont Manuel, Jefferson County, co-founder of Student Alliance for Mental Health Innovation and Action**

Oftentimes, when another shooting hits the presses, it's framed around claims about the shooter's mental health. For many people, there is an almost automatic association between mental illness and these horrific episodes of violence. But this is a misconception, one of the most dangerous and pervasive ones in the world of mental health.

Granted, there is a small subset of those affected by mental health challenges who may, at a few critical points, be more likely to engage in violence. But, by and large, those who grapple with mental health challenges are more likely to be the victims of violence instead of the perpetrators. The many factors behind violent behavior aren't yet well understood, and this complex dynamic often causes easier narratives—that every person struggling with mental health is a threat to society—to slip through.

While we may not be able to explain the psychological factors behind episodes of violence, what we do know is that students are hurting, suffering, often silently, in the wake of school shootings. The holes ripped through the bodies of the Parkland, Marshall County, and many many more of our fellow students, echo in the reverberating holes ripped in the hearts, minds, and souls of the students and communities affected by these events.

The rise and frequency of school shootings has stoked anxiety among students to unprecedented levels. So many of us walk through the halls every day, fearful that an announcement will come over the speakers telling us that an intruder has entered the building.

Just two days ago, a threat against a school with the same name as mine began to circulate on social media. As soon as a friend texted me a picture of the threat, we began to panic. The ten minutes that lapsed before we found a news article reporting that an arrest was made were some of the most fearful of my life. It was one of the first times I have actually, truly feared for my safety. When I tried to pick my math homework back up, which I'd quickly abandoned a few moments before, I couldn't bring myself to focus. Instead, the possibility of my high school being the next one splashed on the front page of papers and repeated on the radio. The possibility that, in 24 hours, 17 of my friends, or even myself, could be dead, the possibility that I'd never again see the faces of my favorite teachers, were etched in my head.

Aside from this incident, my district has been lucky enough to largely escape the countless threats being levied against Kentucky schools, though we have not escaped their ripple effect. There is no Kentucky student or teacher, or any student

or teacher across the nation, unaffected by recent tragedies. I distinctly remember the day, almost two months ago, of the Marshall County Shooting. I was sitting in French class when my phone buzzed and a news alert reading “BREAKING: School shooting in Kentucky” popped up. I couldn’t believe what I saw. Many in my class and my school quickly devolved into fear and anxiety and borderline panic as we imagined what our peers just a few hours away were going through.

On the day of the Parkland shooting, we stared in disbelief, robotically, at the television screen as the death toll climbed up. And up. And up. The week after, when my district implemented a new response system to threats, suggesting that students run out of the building or even actively combat the shooter, throwing cans of food and classroom items so we can escape with our lives, our school became an even more alarming atmosphere of apprehension and fear. When almost every student at our school walked out last Wednesday, so many of us could not hold back tears as we heard the names and saw the faces of lives cut so unfairly, so cruelly, short.

This toxic school climate compounds the already deteriorating mental health among high schoolers. Even before any of these shootings, one in seven Kentucky high school students were already seriously considering suicide each year. There’s no room for us to constantly have to fear for our own lives and the lives of our beloved friends and teachers.

Our focus this far has been to ensure the physical safety of our students, and rightfully so. However, we cannot ignore that being mentally healthy is a fundamental right. As students, we deserve nothing less.

## **WILL POWERS, junior, Somerset High School, Pulaski County**

I came here today to rally alongside passionate and intelligent students advocating for students' safety in schools. But I also came here to provide a unique and often unheard perspective on the issue of gun control. I grew up and live in a small town in southern Kentucky, Somerset. I love my town, from our school traditions to our beautiful lake; But underneath all of the beauty, traditions, and mom & pop shops, there is a prevalent regressive culture and deeply rooted in this culture are guns.

I shot my first gun when I was 8. A .22 caliber hunting rifle. As I lifted it and made my first shot right into a Pepsi can, I was joyous. In my innocent mind I was holding a toy only used to harm Pepsi cans and deer, not a weapon that tears families, communities, and countries apart, not something capable of taking lives of kids my age.

Growing up, I was exposed to guns quite often. I would go hunting with my dad on weekends. I always had fun. I never had a reason to think that "guns were bad". I would talk about guns with other kids; they were all just as immersed in this culture as I was. We wore camo clothing as a symbol of our pride in hunting, and we would praise each other when we bragged about the deer we took down on our recent hunting trips.

All of my beliefs and personal values were shaped by those held by my parents and the local culture. I was taught: Christianity is king, Obama is bad, republican for life, and liberals only want to take our guns and freedom.

But as I grew up, I started to reject these notions. It all started with what I held so close: guns.

I remember the day,

December 14th, 2012. I was in six grade when the Sandy Hook massacre took place, I couldn't believe it. Someone used a gun to kill innocent kids younger than I was?! It was something that never crossed my mind. If guns could kill, if guns were made to kill, how come I didn't know a single gun owner that had killed someone?

I remember coming to school the next day and talking to our teachers about it. They wanted to make us feel safe and make sure our concerns were heard. But it was hard after that. I felt scared of school.

After Sandy Hook, I stopped shooting guns. It didn't feel right anymore. Why was my 12 year old self in possession of something so powerful?

I began to realize that we have a gun problem in this country. I began to reject the culture, reject the oh-so-convenient notion that this is a “mental health problem, not a gun problem”. I saw what happened in Sandy Hook, I saw what happened in Marshall County, I saw what happened in Parkland. I know it’s a gun problem.

I wish our lawmakers would protect us. If it’s a mental health problem, they should provide schools with funding for counselors. They should support organizations that promote mental health awareness. If you think it’s a gun problem, then advocate for background checks, waiting periods, and bans on assault rifles. Coming from a hunting family, I know that assault rifles aren’t made for hunting. They are made for killing.

Today, I advocate for mental health awareness AND gun control.

If I was able to defy the ideals that have been ingrained by my community, then lawmakers can defy lobbyist and corporations to speak for ALL of their constituents.

Thank you.

**SANAA KAHLOON, freshman, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, Fayette County**

Our legislators are aware of this movement, but I'm not sure they understand that this is about more than just our physical safety. This is about our fear, our frustration, our anger, and above all else, our hunger for change. We can all agree that innocent children should not be killed at school or anywhere else. Just in 2016, 33,636 American lives were cut short due to gun violence, counting suicides and accidental discharges, both equally as tragic. Each loss is an insult to our American ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Nowhere else in the developed world is there a lobby devoted to actively promoting gun sales. In Japan, a country with restrictive gun laws, the number of gun deaths per year consistently remains in single digits.

Today we demand justice. Our ideas vary tremendously when it comes to implementing change. My beliefs are influenced not only by politics but my religion. The Quran teaches, "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah [God] even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be against rich or poor, for Allah can best protect them both." I'm here to follow this command. To fulfill it, our country must listen.

There can be no denying that here in America, there is a problem. It goes beyond the obvious statistics and penetrates our hearts and minds. School shootings have created a widespread panic. Everyone has a story:

Parents afraid to send their kids to school; administrators working tirelessly to ensure our safety; a teacher's eight year old child, hugging her, crying, begging her not to go to work because he's afraid his mom won't come home; students finding the fastest escape route in each classroom, flinching every time someone goes on the intercom because they're afraid that the next lockdown announced won't be a drill, that they'll be the next to bury a best friend.

But this isn't just a matter of casualties, this is about their impacts. This is about classes becoming safe rooms, students crying on their books. This is about those who feel threatened by students making their voices heard. All over the country there were schools that forbade students from walking out, reprimanded, punished,

or even suspended them. Freedom of speech and our right to protest are a cornerstone of our American democracy. Without it we will regress.

To all the people that have questioned the power of youth: LOOK at our faces, HEAR our voice.

**HIATT ALLEN, graduate of Tates Creek High School in Fayette County and of American University, will be attending Divinity School next year**

The only thing people seem to say anymore after a tragedy is that their thoughts and prayers are with those affected.

And I get that, to some extent. The tragedy is fresh, it is emotional and it's hard to know what to say to someone who has gone through such a horrific event especially, when it's not happening in your community. And thoughts and prayers are comfortable, easy, and politically correct.

And thinking about the tragedy and praying about it helps us to process it. For many, it's a regular part of reflecting and mourning those that are lost.

But while it may be an easy statement and a necessary mourning process, thoughts and prayers alone are not enough. Pray all you want but what are you doing to bring about what you are praying for?

If we believe that prayers are enough, that means our prayers are always answered without any work on our part. So, then why do we get medical treatment? Why do we work? Why do we try and improve our world?

If prayer was answered by an omnipotent God interceding on our behalf, the world would be an immaculate place

The power of prayer lies in figuring out the actions you need to take to bring about what you are asking for. Praying to God is a place for self-reflection and self-actualization. What can I do to fix the problems? What can we do to change the world for the better?

Prayer can't work alone because God works through us to create a better and more compassionate world.

The epistle of James says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

What good are our prayers without work on our part? What does our faith mean if we don't put it into action by fighting for policies, causes, and issues we believe will bring about God's will on earth?

The people who think prayer should not be followed by action reminds me of the story of a man who lived next to a river.

During a terrible storm, a man heard a radio report that the river was going to rush up and flood the town, and that all the residents should evacuate their homes.

But the man said, "I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me."

The waters rose up, a guy in a rowboat came along and he shouted to the man, "Hey, you in there. The town is flooding. Let me take you to safety."

But the man shouted back, "I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me."

A helicopter came and hovered overhead and a guy with a megaphone shouted, "Hey, you down there. The town is flooding. Let me drop this ladder and I'll take you to safety."

But the man shouted back that he was religious, that he prayed, that God loved him and that God will take him to safety. Well, the man drowned.

Afterward, the man asked God, "I'm a religious man, I pray, I thought you loved me. Why did this happen?"

God said, "I sent you a radio report, a rowboat, and a helicopter. What are you doing here?"

We must recognize that faith calls us to action. Without action prayer is meaningless. We cannot stop at praying. We have to fight to make our prayers a reality.

**AUSTIN BOWMAN, DOWN TROWELL, FAITH HENNIG, and KHAMARI BROOKS,  
seniors, Fern Creek High School, Jefferson County**

**FAITH:** Freshman year, there was a gunman in our school. He was a student, and he shot someone, but it was the wrong person, over an iPad and money. He darted out of the school, and we were on lockdown for three hours. We were all in different places. I was in the band room closet which is supposed to be made for band instruments but fit 50 plus kids in the class. We were like little sardines in there.

**AUSTIN:** I heard someone tell the principal someone was shot even before any announcement was made. When the announcement came on, I felt a rush of fear. You don't know what's actually going on. You don't know how many shooters there are, what type of weapons the shooter has or why they are doing this. It doesn't matter what scale a shooting is. The fear during any shooting is the same because there is so much you don't know.

**DON:** I saw the shooting happen, and it was just too much. It was the most *instantaneous trauma* I could ever think of or experience. I remember going to tell people to warn them and they were like, "No, what are you talking about? You're literally insane Don." It hit a little too close to home because something like that had happened to me that year already. I had seen another shooting outside of school that year. It gave me flashbacks and doubt in the school system's will to keep myself and my peers safe

**AUSTIN:** People that were close to the person who was shot could go to a counselor if they wanted to talk to someone, but there were no conversations to be had about policies in school or how we felt about it.

**FAITH:** For the rest of that month, we felt like you'd better not get caught talking about it. At the time, I was a little baby freshman, so I didn't dare say anything. I was actually traumatized. I didn't realize it until this year because so many people have joked about it or not talked about it at all. But whenever the announcements come on, at certain times of the day, when they're not supposed to come on, we associate it with what happened. I get anxiety.

**KHAMARI:** The shooting was one of the things that activated us. Probably a week later, people acted like nothing happened. But for certain students like us, it made us more willing to want to change the school and do things about the school climate. We started getting much more involved in our

school community, whether that was participating in more extracurricular activities or just simply speaking out about issues.

AUSTIN: When the shooting happened in our school, students were trying to speak out, and that was the first instance of student voice that I had seen at our school. Students wanted to talk, but it felt like no one was acknowledging what had happened. Whether the person died or not, this was something that affected our safety. Students in our school were writing letters, they were proposing ideas to administrators, but no one was listening.

KHAMARI: That's when we started making some changes ourselves. We helped launch a program called LIFT. Our teacher, Mr. T., who started it wanted to help us talk about things we weren't talking about and take our voices into the community. It was all about creating passion projects that allowed us to do things that improved the world around us and led to our involvement in a bunch of other programs that we helped start like the Black Student Union and What's the Story. It also led us to connect with the Student Voice Team. All of these programs make space for students to reflect and be heard on issues concerning our education.

It's important for students to speak up and speak out. It's powerful. For example, the reason we started the Black Student Union was because we knew that some things needed to be talked about and we needed to spark a deeper conversation in our school and our community. The most uncomfortable conversations are the ones that are always the best and have the most meaning.

DON: We've done a lot of work, but there's so much more to do. There are still adults who say, "Why give a student the time of day? Why should we listen to them?" But we've made so much progress in showing people why students should have a voice that it would be pointless to stop. There are a few teachers in my school who helped me understand why it was so important to help my community and those who don't necessarily have a voice to do it themselves. I always felt like it was important but kept it inside. Talking about how I felt was never a priority until I met them. I was always able to speak my mind, but until I got involved, I was never able to promote a better way, to find solutions. I didn't really have the information and education I do now. I feel like we are a light.

FAITH: We participated in the walk out last week, but we did a walk-in at our school because we didn't really have anywhere to go since there's a

main street right in front of our school. We wanted to keep the focus on the issue of gun violence. We had over 500 kids who chose to do it with us, and we saw that as a gauge that people are seeing what we are doing and know we are making a difference. They have respect for what we are trying to do. We talked about gun violence and awareness and how to recognize when students are in trouble.

**KHAMARI:** How you feel about school safety depends on where you're coming from. I feel like our school needs to incorporate better security systems into schools, including metal detectors, more cameras, better security technology.

**AUSTIN:** Of course, I agree that our schools need to be safe, but I don't want us to transform our schools into fortresses. I feel like metal detectors, or more police officers, or teachers with guns, that doesn't make me feel any safer. That's not why I come to school! I don't want to go to school seven hours a day and feel like I'm in a correctional facility! It's ridiculous that instead of reforming gun laws to make it more difficult to secure a firearm, and banning high capacity magazines, that we increase the security at schools. Shootings happen at many different places. This does nothing for the people who are killed in mass shootings at concerts or nightclubs. We cannot settle for school security when the heart of the problem is the lack of gun reform in America.

**FAITH:** I think the idea of see something, say something is important to keep schools safe because a lot of things can be prevented if a student speaks up.

**DON:** Students come from different backgrounds--even students from the same school. Students who come from more privilege see the system as more responsive to them. It proves to be a system that is more concerned for them in most cases. They are more trusting. They have more of a sense of security.

So maybe we can't agree on how much freedom we are willing to give up in exchange for feeling physically safe at school. But we can all agree that none of us students wants to be further restricted when it comes to being heard. When it comes to making schools a safe place for everyone to learn, student voices, just like ours, have to matter.

**BRYAN PADILLA, senior, Connor High School, Boone County**

Kentucky is my home. That's why I'm here today. That's why I must say – with a heavy heart – that the bottom line is that many of us, as students, parents, and educators, feel that our schools are not safe.

Right now, we are seeing yet another wave of momentum behind the voices who remind us over and over again that the gaps in our schools' safety are unacceptable. With that, I urge you: do not let this momentum be so easily dismissed.

The fact that we are convening today is a testament to the fact that we realize that we need change. Furthermore, we are here because we know that this change requires that we are well informed on what we wish to fix. That's just the first step. What comes next is the hard part.

We cannot rely solely on complex bureaucracies and government to immediately solve our school safety concerns. We cannot rely on the media to voice our traumatized and yearning voices and expect change to occur. We want policy changes to be the solution to everything, but, realistically, it's going to be up to each and every one of us, as individuals, to take the lessons we learn here today back to our communities to make changes on an immediate and tangible level. In this, I must say to everyone: the solution to our sorrows does not lie on either end of the spectrum. Kentucky, its people and its culture, are unique. We should not be forced to give up any elements of our culture, our morals, or our beliefs to settle the school safety issue.

The people speaking here today will unveil the complexity of the school safety issue, but an aspect I wanted to touch on is the fact that school shootings are a male-dominated issue. I've researched and compiled data on the sex, age, and race of shooters in over 200 incidents involving firearms at countless institutions across the United States since 2000. In categorizing the sex of each shooter, I kept typing the same thing: male. In fact, 95% of the shooters I studied were male. That's an issue.

It's an issue addressed by a man named Dr. Warren Farrell who spoke at a TEDx event about what he defined as "The Boy Crisis." He gave his TED Talk in 2015, over two years ago, where he said that, even in 2015, we'd been having an average of one school shooting a week since Sandy Hook. In his talk, Dr. Farrell chronicles the male experience in 21st-century American society. Most importantly, he maintains that as much as we want to make school shooters out to be monsters, the fact they are human holds a variety of factors that we can learn from.

Dr. Farrell outlines a few very important causes that have contributed to this so called "Boy Crisis," but his first outlined cause, and the cause I will elaborate on, is

what he calls “dad-deprived boys.” Dr. Farrell says, “Boys who hurt, hurt us.” He cites research that supports the fact that dad-deprived boys are less empathic, less assertive, have poorer academic performance, are more homicidal, are more likely to be in prison, and are much more likely to be suicidal, especially in comparison to their female counterparts under the same circumstances.

As a kid who has not had his father in his life for more than four years now, I can tell you that what he says sounds about right. I used to be that quiet kid in elementary and middle school who the teachers worried about. I used to not have friends. I used to struggle tremendously in my social life. I was getting C’s and D’s in middle school. Now, here I am. I’ve been accepted to MIT, and I’ve learned to acquire the critical life skills I lacked due to the inexplicable stresses put upon me during some of the most crucial years of my development. If it were not for my mother, my educators, my mentors, and my community in general, it’s safe to say that I would not have made it down this path in my life where I am speaking here today.

There are many boys in shoes akin to mine who have not dealt with dad-deprivation as I have. Tragically, one of those boys was a friend of mine. William Hicks, my friend, died by a self-inflicted gunshot to the head on May 22nd, 2017. William grew up without a father, and the effects of such a fact were expressed in many aspects of his life that led to his death. In talking to William’s mother about today, she agreed. She said, “if there was more help in the school systems, maybe my boy would have had a chance. It seemed like everywhere I turned for help, they turned us down.” Know that William is not the only one. Know that the unfortunate truth is that the unconditional love and support I received in my hardship is not commonplace. We have many misconstrued boys and young men battling their own psyches while growing up in a confusing, continuously changing, and seemingly cold society, especially in high school. As we learned recently, even heartwarming and gregarious small-town America – like the one I live in in Northern Kentucky – is no exception to this. This issue is an intertwinement of many complex factors, and the solution lies in effective and proper policy and budgeting that can effectively address them all. We know that times are tough, but our presence here today should showcase that there are many, even students, who are here and who wish to work alongside our policymakers in fixing Kentucky – our home – and playing a role in changing our country for the better. We seek your leadership, persistence, and cooperation in spearheading not only policy, but efforts in our communities to make our schools safe and our communities healthier and happier once again.

Nothing will change unless we all – elected officials, school administrators, parents, teachers, and most definitely students – play an informed role in owning and being the change that we seek.

Rest in peace William Hicks, 18-years-young. Thank you.

## **ASHTON BISHOP, junior, Green County High School**

Being raised in a small town and rural community, I grew up around guns. Guns are everywhere in Green County. and it's not out of the ordinary to be outside and hear someone fire a rifle or to see a hunter to leave their gun in their vehicle during school.

The culture of Green County is intertwined with guns. For some, hunting enables them to put food on the table. We talk openly and causally about guns, to an extent that they are normalized. Because everyone is taught gun safety as a child, we aren't supposed to fear them.

Even as school shootings started to occur more and more, I believed they were just an inner city issue. I could never imagine my town being next.

But last month, on February 26th, my outlook changed forever.

Green County High School had its first gun threat. We were placed under lockdown for 2 hours until the suspect was found. Initially, we were informed that a student had a gun, stored bullets, and a list of targets. After lockdown we learned there was never a gun or bullets, but there was a list of students being targeted for terror.

Since that day, many people in my school and town have been on edge. Just the mere thought of a gun in school has shaken me and many of my peers to our cores. It's difficult to be afraid of something that before one incident you were never scared of. I stand here demanding a change... Because right now, Green County does not feel like home.

**WILL BYERMAN & SANTIAGO O'NEIL, sophomores, Henry Clay High School, Fayette County**

SANTIAGO: "School Climate" refers to the overall "feel" of a school, an average consensus of the mood among students and administrators. A multitude of variables go into creating school climate, including the workload of students and staff, the social dynamics between students as peers, and our relationships with the aforementioned adults. These factors look different at every school, but consistently influence the belonging students feel or the lack thereof.

It is imperative to note, however, that a school doesn't have to be the direct target of a shooting to be affected. When an earthquake occurs, it is destructive in its aftershock, not just its pinnacle. After there is an incident involving a firearm or the like in a school, a ripple effect may spread across the county and the region at large-- adversely affecting school climate and the ability of students to learn in a safe and conducive environment.

At Henry Clay High School in Lexington, we watched as a single gun confiscation turned into a rumor mill, with students talking of suicide, numerous guns, planned shootings, a drug overdose, arrests, pictures of pistols. Students and teachers were unsure of what was true and what wasn't. Nearly half of the students had left by fifth hour. Less than a third showed up the next day. This instance at Henry Clay illustrates the ability of one inanimate object, to corrupt what should be a warm and secure learning environment.

WILL: Safety goes beyond gun control; it transcends what is physical, and becomes much more psychologically complex. Because gun violence is both a symptom and a contributor to a much larger disease: defective school climate. If schools strive to be conducive to learning, then they must recognize that security and openness are not mutually exclusive. For students to foster relationships and study material, they cannot feel like they are behind bars, as is the case all too often among students today.

Most schools have not experienced the atrocities that occurred in Marshall County and Parkland, yet they can suffer some of the same symptoms that foster an environment in which those tragedies can occur. Regardless of location, all American students suffer from the ripple effect of these events.

Students and citizens across the nation cannot continue to be forced to reconcile with these experiences. But acknowledging the issues of gun violence and poor school climate are only as valuable as the solutions formed based on our understanding of them. We need, more than condolences and acknowledgement, we need to collaborate with civic leaders, elected officials, teachers, parents, psychologists, and social-workers. We need a solutions-oriented conversation, and we need to have it with the entire community. Violence in our schools is everyone's challenge. Not just our schools'. Not just our administrators'. Not just our students'. *It is everyone's challenge*, and thus requires everyone to work to find solutions, common ground.

## **ANNIE STAUFFER, senior, Daviess County High School**

In January, there was a shooting at Marshall County High School. Since then, we've had two gun threats at my school in Owensboro, and I know friends across the state have had similar experiences.

What happened at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School ignited a flame within students across the country. And what Kentucky needs to know about school climate and safety is that that flame—the one that will drive us to take a stand and fight for schools that feel safe—is here to stay. What Kentucky needs to know about school climate and safety is that listening to the ideas, opinions, and voices of students can no longer be an afterthought.

This is the moment where we have to pause and think critically about the climate of our schools—how can we help students feel connected to each other and to their schools?

The way students feel about their school has significant impact on how they learn, and we can't separate current political and social issues from that fact. Change starts with listening. It starts with opening up conversations so young people aren't just allowed to share their experiences and knowledge, but encouraged to. Students have opinions and solutions. We shouldn't have to wait until we are of voting age to express them.

Kentucky, there are a lot of steps we can take to improve school safety. We need increased funding and support for mental health services in schools. We need responsible gun ownership. We need school discipline policies that help students rather than criminalizing them. We need open dialogues on social and emotional support between students and teaching staff. But we also need room for students to have a say in these conversations.

The public's shock that students care—that we can make a difference—is what holds us back. Students can, must, and have overcome our learned helplessness. Student movements have been impetus of change throughout history. In 1967, thousands of students in Philadelphia walked out of school to protest racial discrimination they faced in both their school and community. Their requests for a more relevant and diverse curriculum and less discriminatory school policies were met with police brutality and incarceration. In 1970, after twenty-eight U.S. National Guardsmen fired over sixty rounds in less than fifteen seconds, killing four students as they protested the Vietnam War at Kent State University, four million students from around the country refused to attend school in resistance and solidarity. Students care, and they can, must, and have made a difference.

We are one society. We are a democracy. We must strive to abolish the ageism that has kept students from serving as partners with adults in making our schools better. Kentucky can't make significant strides toward improved school climate without students.

We have to work together to achieve safety and equity for students across the state—and for the students who will come after us. I want the next generation of students at my high school to know they are safe, supported, and heard. Students are not just the future. We are a vibrant part of the present. On March 20th, history can note that Kentucky students asked not only for a change, but to make that change with adults, as partners.

**SAHAR MOHAMMADZADEH, senior, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, Fayette County**

We rally here today in solidarity. With remembrance. With respect for the courageous who shared their narratives, and with appreciation for those who came from all corners of the state to spark the integral conversations that need to be happening inside of the walls of the building behind me, not just on the steps. Our stories, our narratives hold tremendous power to ignite change. Here on the Capitol Steps, we have the state's attention, and now is the time to capitalize on that. This fight doesn't stop at the rally's end, nor when we go home or when we go to school tomorrow. It is imperative, critical that we call our legislators that we hold them accountable for representing their constituents--constituents that include those of us who may even be too young to vote. It is imperative that we have these intergenerational conversations. It is imperative that we continue to amplify the voices of every students from all backgrounds.

Kentucky must know that all of our voices matter.

So in this light, let them hear our voices. Let us tell them to Stand with Students.

What do we say to Kentucky Legislators?

STAND WITH STUDENTS

We are tired of walking into classrooms and having our first thought be, "Where would we hide in the event of a school shooting." So we say to Kentucky legislators:

STAND WITH STUDENTS

We are tired of schools being a place where we no longer feel safe, where we are perpetually on edge and uneasy. So we say to Kentucky Legislators

STAND WITH STUDENTS

We are tired of not talking about school climate and the relationships students have towards each other. We need to make schools a place where students feel welcomed and loved. So we say to Kentucky legislators:

STAND WITH STUDENTS

We are tired of hardening our schools. Rather than talking about hardening, we should be talking about creating more compassionate ones. So we say to Kentucky legislators:

STAND WITH STUDENTS

We students are tired of attending schools that don't place a critical emphasis on mental health and well-being. So we say to Kentucky legislators.

STAND WITH STUDENTS

We students are tired of having to fight for representation because just because we are too young to vote doesn't mean we can't have a voice. So we say to Kentucky legislatures.

STAND WITH STUDENTS

We commit to continue to make Kentucky's education system the best it can possibly be by getting and staying involved in finding solutions to threats to our safety and other things that hold us back. We commit to do this because we know we are not alone. We know that young people and adults can, must, and will work together to--please say it with me one last time--

STAND WITH STUDENTS

# BEYOND GUNS

*This piece has run in several Kentucky newspapers as an Op-Ed by SVT members.*

For many Kentucky high school students growing up with the memories of Heath, Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook, recent events have made it feel as though our schools are under siege.

And this was true even before the recent school shootings took the lives of two students at Marshall County High School in Benton, Kentucky and 17 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Several months prior to these tragedies, the Student Voice Team conducted a school climate survey of 1552 students at three geographically-diverse Kentucky high schools. Of the students responding, 47% reported that they worry about violence at their school and 19% said that they do so frequently.

Since the Benton and Parkland shootings, many of us have been on edge with real gun confiscations, social media scares, and precautionary lockdowns. Sixteen-year old Bree Owen from Daviess County High School expressed a common sentiment: “I feel scared, but also frustrated,” she said. “Usually when we get threats, it’s written on walls or sent over texts then extended into rumors that make their way throughout everyone. It gets to the point where I don’t know what I should be scared about and what I shouldn’t.”

National conversations about school safety since Parkland have focused on what to do about weapons: how to “harden the target,” how to arm teachers, and how to reduce access to guns. As a response to mass school shootings, this may make sense. But while mass school shootings seem to be on the rise, they are rare: since 1996, there have been 16 multiple victim shootings in schools. And over the past 25 years, an average of 10 students per year out of over 50 million public school students in the United States have lost their lives to a school shooter. Contrast the scope with the Centers for Disease Control survey showing that over 20% of high school students report having been bullied on school property and nearly 8% report having been in a physical fight there.

These facts do not diminish the horrific experience students, families, and communities affected by school shootings endure. But they also suggest the conversation we are having about how to make students feel safer must get beyond guns.

We need to talk about school climate and the relationships students have to each other and to adults in school as well as the norms, goals, values and nature of education that make school a place where students from a wide range of backgrounds can love learning and feel safe, welcome, and loved themselves.

More specifically, while we do need to address inappropriate access to guns like the one used in Parkland and on our streets, in order to ensure schools that are conducive to learning at high levels, we must do much more. As Ron Avi Astor, a specialist in school violence from the University of Southern California explains, when it comes to school safety, we must also look at preventative care.

Astor's research shows that the students who bring guns to schools are the students who most frequently report being ostracized or bullied themselves. It also suggests that if we can address student marginalization sooner, we have a much better shot at stemming school violence later.

A preventative approach means we must consider such things as whether our discipline policies are constructive and rehabilitative and fairly administered. We must evaluate students' mental health so they can get the help they need and ensure that school counselors are better resourced and less overwhelmed by their caseloads. And we must build capacity in young people and adults to support each other socially and emotionally.

Rather than talking about hardening our schools, we should be talking about creating more compassionate ones.

Fortunately, as student activists around the country are demonstrating in this moment, young people are ready to help lead the charge. Policymakers would be wise to heed our interest and energy and enlist us as full partners in finding solutions.



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This work was created by the Kentucky Student Voice Team while part of the Prichard Committee. The Prichard Committee is an independent, nonpartisan citizens' advocacy group working to improve education for Kentuckians of all ages.