



Standing with Students: Fewer guns, Safer Schools

Dear Marylanders,

After the recent tragedy in Texas, it is now deadlier for America's [kids to be in school than in the military](#), and since a gunman walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut almost 6 years ago there have been over 250 school shootings in America. Each led to the death or serious injury of an educator, parent, or child. Great Mills High School in Maryland was sadly a recent addition to this list, and if we fail to act now, this year will not be the last time that Maryland students have to march for their lives.

This can no longer be about politics or partisanship. It is about parents asking for better policy to protect our kids. And I believe everyone who holds or seeks elected office in America must stand up now to answer our children's demands — and pledge to take swift action. As a new mom, I personally am sick and tired of the thoughts and prayers, the partisan gridlock, and the elected officials who don't have the spine to declare that enough is enough. Every single day that we fail to act costs lives, and it sends a message to our nation's young people that political gain is more important than progress on preventing gun violence.

Now more than ever, we need nation-wide, comprehensive gun violence prevention laws and safety measures that will fully protect our kids from becoming both the victims and perpetrators of violence at school. No child should be afraid to receive an education, but the moral failure of our leaders Washington means states like Maryland must fill the leadership vacuum to protect our kids. I've joined forces with student leaders, former police commissioners, teachers, moms, and elected officials to help bring Maryland to the cutting edge of the debate about how to curb gun violence.

And as governor, I pledge to make the Maryland school system a national model for school safety and educational excellence by doing the following:

- (1) Treating gun violence as a public health challenge
- (2) Supporting and re-training law enforcement
- (3) Implementing stronger gun violence prevention policy

We need to treat gun violence as a holistic public health crisis. The NRA has suggested we should arm educators and "harden the perimeter" of schools to prevent shootings. They seem to think teachers need shooting lessons, instead of better training to identify and support at-risk youth. And based on recent proposals by Governor Hogan and some of Maryland's Republican legislators, it appears that they agree with them.

The truth is that the track record of school shootings in America clearly indicates how many of the measures Governor Hogan and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos have endorsed — from bigger locks on doors to additional armed resource officers or teachers — will not save lives. A 2017 review of the incidents at Columbine, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, and other schools by Xavier University’s Department of Criminal Justice found that the additional policing and “access control” measures have very little preventive effect on incidence of school violence.¹ While we need to take common sense steps to improve safety, I also firmly believe in attacking the root causes of school shootings, so we put an end – right now — to the absolutely unacceptable frequency of this form of violence.

And let me be very clear, keeping our kids safe from gun violence about more than just school safety. Excel Academy in Baltimore has lost seven students to gun violence in the past year. Until we control the flow of illicit guns, and particularly handguns, into our state, our kids will not be safe. How we respond to this crisis will define what message we send to our children about the world that we are working with them to build. We must choose to take action and to support students, or continue watching kids across America die preventable deaths.

I believe in following the evidence when making policy and taking direct action to protect our kids and educators. Too many innocent children have died because government will not take the most basic of preventive steps like improving mental health resources, lockdown and escape protocols, and gun violence prevention.

It’s time to act. I hope you will join me.

Sincerely,

Krish Vignarajah
Candidate for Governor

¹ Jonson, C.L., 2017. Preventing School Shootings: The Effectiveness of Safety Measures. *Victims & Offenders*, 12(6), pp.956–973.

I. The Public Health Crisis: Stopping violence before it happens

No Maryland community needs to mourn the senseless loss of their children and teachers. We must treat gun violence as a public health problem, while simultaneously taking steps to make schools safer and law enforcement officials better equipped. Preventive steps to stop violence before it happens remain the best way to keep our children safe, and Maryland has all the necessary tools and resources to become a national model for preventive safety measures and mental health awareness. Now we just need to act. Instead of putting more guns and armed resource officers in schools, I propose the following measures:

- **Allocate \$50 million for state-sponsored research into gun violence as a public health issue at state and private universities and expand the Maryland Center for School Safety’s annual budget.** As long as the NRA continues to block the federal government from funding school safety and gun violence research at the Center for Disease Control, the State of Maryland will work tirelessly to better understand how best to keep our schools and communities safe.
- **Re-fund and expand Operation Safe Kids.** This Baltimore-based program, which Governor Hogan inexplicably decided to de-fund, uses high-touch interventions to divert the kids most at risk to become victims or perpetrators of gun violence towards better educational opportunities and life outcomes. It also offers wrap-around services to participating students and their families, ensuring kids have a roof over their head and food to eat while they concentrate on their education.
- **Invest in preventive behavioral and mental health programs.** Every Maryland School should have trained and well supported “mental health coordinators” who specifically focus on the mental health and wellbeing of students. Too many young people suffer from undiagnosed mental health issues, and the State of Maryland can do more to de-stigmatize those who quietly struggle with depression and anxiety. In particular, suspended or expelled students need additional mental and behavioral supports from the state, not less. A school is often the only point of contact between students and mental health professionals; we should be expanding programs to help students – not putting bigger locks on the doors.
- **Create a new state-sponsored awareness campaign** coordinated by the Center for School Safety — and in partnership with state-funded research at one of Maryland’s major research universities — to help teachers, staff, parents, and administrators better identify and support students at-risk of becoming violent.
- **Provide state-funded grants to local governments to bolster anti-bullying efforts in schools.** In too many cases of school shootings, the perpetrator is a young person who feels alienated and alone. The State of Maryland must invest in existing grassroots and state-coordinated efforts to combat bullying. Further, existing and proposed awareness campaigns to prevent school shootings and de-stigmatize mental health issues should incorporate language on this issue, particularly as it relates to cyber-bullying. Our

communities must take real steps to ensure kids in Maryland do not feel alienated or alone at school.

- **Partner with social media firms** to track and identify the harmful online behavior that leads to school shootings. Cyber bullying, social ostracization, and other easily identifiable activity can lead to depression, anxiety, and the escalation of violent online posts just before a shooting. Organizations like Maryland's Center for School Shooting can use techniques like data mining and geo-fencing to quickly search for and identify online behavior near schools that might escalate towards violence. My administration would fund dedicated positions at a centralized hub like the Center for School Safety to engage in preventative searches and coordinate with law enforcement.
- **Promote trauma-informed teaching and practices in schools.** Too many students across the state have been witness to or victims of violence. We need to account for these circumstances to help students overcome educational barriers and break the cycle of violence that afflicts too many communities, and particularly communities of color, from Montgomery County to Baltimore City.

II. Supporting Law Enforcement and Preventive Safety Measures

Maryland's Center for School Safety acts as a workable coordinating body for improving law enforcement's capacity to prevent school shootings. The Center brings together schools, parents, government, and outside organizations to disseminate best practices and generally promote efforts to improve school safety. Unfortunately, Governor Hogan only recently promised to adequately fund the organization. My administration would guarantee our state's best preventive apparatus receives the funding it deserves, so it can better support law enforcement and promote the following efforts:

- **Implement standardized safety trainings and “best practices” for lockdown and escape situations in every Maryland school** based on recommendations by the Maryland Center for School Safety. This program would create clear lockdown protocol and escape plans for educators that are customized to their school.
- **Mandate a certified expert in Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) review all designs for community centers and schools.** These experts ensure the design of public spaces take simple preventative steps to improve safety, such as placing the office, not the auditorium or cafeteria, at the front entrance of a school. By incorporating experts in crime work with police and communities to improve safety long before violence occurs will re-orient the emphasis of police departments from enforcement to prevention.
- **Standardize and improve communications technology within schools**, so authorities can quickly coordinate with teachers. These improvements should primarily include working two-way intercom systems and key fobs for teachers to wear and use as panic buttons, which could provide first-responders with real-time data on the location of shooting or escalation of violence within a school building.
- **Prepare for and invest in a “next generation 911” system with state oversight and management.** Maryland law enforcement officials currently lack their own communication network. So in crisis situations, where cell towers are often overloaded, this infrastructural deficiency means that vital information often fails to reach officers on the ground in real time. I propose convening a commission with law enforcement experts and community leaders from across Maryland to propose policy to develop and implement separate communication networks for law enforcement, which will also enable citizens to more readily text or send information to officers in a crisis. The next generation of policing must be community-driven, and the technology police use to do their jobs should reflect this goal.
- **Expand current preventive efforts by law enforcement, the state, and school officials** to identify students via social media and other channels who are at-risk of becoming violent. This effort should be coordinated through the Maryland Center for School Safety.
- **Expand community-policing models and examine the role of law enforcement in schools.** Our police training and tactics should focus on tools to de-escalate violence.

Encouraging this mindset fundamental shift in law-enforcement officials — away from the use of force — will help prevent the tragic police-related deaths of unarmed Marylanders. We cannot pretend to improve our children’s safety, while failing to critically examine the role of law enforcement on campuses. Community-policing models and de-escalation tactics and training, standardized throughout the state under Maryland law, would both reduce implicit bias and help officers better identify students at-risk to commit violence. If you are a member of the community you police, it will be easier to quickly and accurately identify students in need of an intervention.

- **Fund the expansion of mobile crisis teams statewide.** Mobile crisis teams pair officers with social workers, and when responding to a 911 call, the social worker and officer can work together to de-escalate a situation, particularly when minors are involved.
- **Work with local school systems and police departments to end the school-to-prison pipeline by halting “zero-tolerance” discipline policies** that rip at-risk students from learning environments, just when they need support the most. These policies stunt students’ educational development, increase the high-school dropout rate, and disproportionately impact poor and minority students. Maryland must explore alternatives to suspension and expulsion, promoting strategies that work for students like restorative justice programs.
- **Prepare for and invest in a “next generation 911” system with state oversight and management.** Maryland law enforcement officials currently lack their own communication network. So in crisis situations, where cell towers are often overloaded, this infrastructural deficiency means that vital information often fails to reach officers on the ground in real time. I propose convening a commission with law enforcement experts and community leaders from across Maryland to propose policy to develop and implement separate communication networks for law enforcement, which will also enable citizens to more readily text or send information to officers in a crisis. The next generation of policing must be community-driven, and the technology police use to do their jobs should reflect this goal.
- **Standardize and improve communications technology within schools,** so authorities can quickly coordinate with teachers. These improvements should primarily include working two-way intercom systems and key fobs for teachers to wear and use as panic buttons, which could provide first-responders with real-time data on the location of shooting or escalation of violence within a school building.

III. Keeping weapons out of kids' hands

Beyond in school measures, the clearest path to ending the senseless murder of our nation's kids remains common sense gun violence prevention policies, particularly those that make it harder for kids to access weapons. This year, President Trump has walked back his support for even the most basic gun control measures, and Betsy DeVos endorsed a set of bigoted policies that expand the school-to-prison pipeline instead of helping vulnerable students get the help that they need. So while Maryland has already outlawed the purchase of assault weapons and the possession of a gun on school property, this unprecedented political climate demands we go further to ensure school shootings never occur in Maryland again. I support the following basic expansions to gun control measures that will help to prevent mass shootings in schools:

- **Raise the minimum age on ALL gun purchases to 21.** No senior in high school should be able to buy a gun and walk into a school.
- **Every handgun, regulated firearm, and rifle must be registered and insured.** We take this simple step to regulate automobiles, yet inexplicably exempt deadly weapons. It's time to keep better track of the guns in our state.
- **Support and enforce "red flag" laws** that allow family members, law enforcement, and others to request court orders to have authorities temporarily seize guns from a person who they believe poses a threat to themselves or others.
- **Ban bump stocks**, which increase semi-automatic rifles rate of fire.
- **Implement stricter background checks and 10-day waiting periods** for the purchase of regulated firearms to give authorities more time to verify the age, identity and mental health of the purchaser — while cracking down on sellers who make guns available to under-aged individuals.
- **Restart Baltimore's gun buyback program**, because no amount of regulation can take all the illegal guns off the streets. We need effective incentives to reduce the total number of firearms in our communities.
- **Improve at-home gun safety for minors.** Every year nearly 800 children in America shoot themselves or others with the guns they find at home. These are entirely preventable deaths, and I propose the following to end this senseless violence:
 - *Mandate additional gun safety training for firearm owners living in households that contain one or more minors.* Gun owners, and particularly inexperienced first-time gun owners, should need to take more than a 4-hour course before bringing a deadly weapon into a home with children.
 - *Give away free gun locks for use in at-home storage.* Pew research data indicates 46% of gun owners with children under 18 living at home fail to lock their guns

away. This inexpensive giveaway program is a low-cost way to immediately begin keeping guns out of kids' hands.

- *Strengthen current gun storage laws related to minors.* It is currently unlawful in Maryland to store or leave a loaded firearm in a location where a child under the age of 16 might gain access to that weapon. We need to increase this age limit to 18 years of age, so no high school student can injure themselves or others intentionally or accidentally.
- **Encourage neighboring states to restrict firearms sales in line with Maryland's 2013 assault weapons ban.** High capacity magazines can still be transferred in neighboring states like Pennsylvania, and too many weapons designed to take human life flow across our borders each year. Unless the states in the Mid-Atlantic region band together to take common sense bi-partisan action, we will never end gun violence.
- **Require "Smart Gun" safety technology on all handguns sold in Maryland by 2025.** The NRA has blocked the advancement of smart gun research and commercialization for years. This technology helps protect police officers from seeing their own weapons turned against them. My administration will convene a commission of safety experts to create industry guidance on gun safety technology for firearms sold in Maryland. By implementing these requirements in the Maryland market, gun manufacturers will be forced to incorporate cutting-edge safety technology into their products, which will improve gun safety and limit the usability of stolen firearms.

We need a governor willing to be a leader, a governor willing to take action. In my first 100 days in office, I will convene the governors of Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Delaware to create a bi-partisan agreement on gun control for our states. Maryland already has some of the nation's strictest gun control measures, but the flow of illicit weapons across our borders undermines even the best prevention efforts. According to research done by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, almost half of the guns confiscated in Maryland each year came from other states. If Washington will not act, governors must come together and shoulder the mantle of leadership for our kids and our communities.

Schools are so often the center of our communities, open long after classes end to serve as a central gathering space for people of all ages. We must begin thinking comprehensively about how to keep these spaces, and all our public spaces, safe and free from gun violence.

Joining together to stand with students

In March, I marched with students in Annapolis – and I will march with them again and again until we see tangible steps towards improving school safety. The second amendment doesn't give us the right to use weapons of war to take a child's life. I stand with the young people from Parkland to Baltimore marching, protesting, and raising their voices to declare that enough is enough.

That's why I've [signed their petition](#) calling on Congress to pass legislation to end gun violence, and should their voices fall on deaf ears in Washington, I will fight here in Maryland to make sure schools in our state are free from violence. How we act now will define the future of our children's safety at school. I'm prepared to act to help the young people in our state and across the nation be heard. Let's act together to end the violence in our schools.

I hope you will join me.

Learn more at:
Krishformaryland.com