



FINAL REPORT:
NJSBA FIREARMS SAFETY TASK FORCE

**Processes, Programs and Practices for
Safety in School, Home and Community**

February 28, 2023

Final Report: NJSBA Firearms Safety Task Force

*Processes, Programs and Practices for Safety
in School, Home and Community*

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www.njsba.org/firearms-safety

Acknowledgement

The NJSBA Firearms Safety Task Force wishes to expressly extend its sincere appreciation to Frank Belluscio for his efforts in bringing this report to fruition. His hard work, dedication, creativity, professionalism and extraordinary writing talents enabled the Task Force to complete this important work and make this report a reality.

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Irene LeFebvre, President
Dr. Timothy Purnell, Executive Director

FROM: Raymond R. Wiss, President Emeritus
Chair, NJSBA Firearms Security Task Force

DATE: February 28, 2023

On behalf of the New Jersey School Boards Association’s Firearms Safety Task Force, I am pleased to present a report on one of the most significant challenges to the well-being of our children: gun violence.

Today, firearm injury is the leading cause of death among America’s children and adolescents. It is imperative, therefore, that local boards of education work with parents and guardians, students and the community at-large to promote firearm safety, prevent gun violence and address its physical and emotional toll on our children.

Our Work The Task Force reviewed data and research on firearm death and injuries; the impact of children’s exposure to violence; effective strategies to protect children from accidental injury; safe gun storage, handling and use; firearm acquisition and licensing; and school- and community-based partnerships that address students’ mental and emotional health, overcome trauma and defuse conflict.

The study group met six times. Members identified programs in place in New Jersey public schools and reviewed data, reports and literature in the areas specified in the Task Force charge. In addition, the group surveyed the NJSBA membership on the significance of gun safety as an issue in their communities, as well as local efforts to address firearm safety and trauma/mental health.

Beyond Polarization The Task Force reached beyond the divisiveness that often surrounds discussion of firearm regulation and developed 24 recommendations and suggested actions that can be embraced by local boards of education throughout New Jersey. They reflect strategies endorsed by child welfare organizations, gun-owner groups, the medical community, experts in public health, education organizations, and other advocates. All recommendations and suggested actions comply with current NJSBA policy.

Moving Forward The Task Force believes that this report can serve as the focal point for a public information effort at the state and community levels to promote firearm safety, reduce gun violence, and address its impact on children. In addition to distributing the report to local boards of education, NJSBA will share it with legislators, state education officials and statewide organizations representing superintendents and other central office administrators, teachers, principals and supervisors, PTAs, and school business administrators, among others.

Significantly, the Task Force leaders will present the report’s findings and suggested actions at upcoming NJSBA programs and county school boards association meetings. The final report will also be the subject of articles in Association publications and outreach to the news media.

The Task Force encourages local school board members to use the report as a reference when communicating with their state senators and Assembly representatives and their partners in municipal government.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to the Task Force members for their commitment of time and effort to this project and their genuine concern for the health and safety of New Jersey’s children.

The NJSBA Firearms Safety Task Force

CHARGE

Recognizing that gun violence is the number one cause of death in America among children under the age of 18, the New Jersey School Boards Association has established the Firearms Safety Task Force, which will:

- Research and identify proactive, preventative programs, processes and actions designed to keep students, their families and others safe from accidental or intentional firearm violence in school, at home, and in the community, and
- Recommend strategies that local boards of education may consider for implementation in their respective districts to prevent acts of violence involving firearms, as well as other weapons. Such programs may address gun safety and firearm storage, healthy school climate and the impact of exposure to violence on student mental health.

The Task Force will complete its work by February 28, 2023.

MEMBERS

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Executive Summary

- The Need for a Proactive Effort
- Establishing the Task Force
- Membership Survey
- Findings and Conclusions
- Recommendations and Suggested Actions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Conduct a Study of Firearm Safety?

- *In 2020, firearm-related injuries surpassed automobile accidents to become the leading cause of death among children and adolescents, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*¹
- *3,597 children died by gunfire in 2021, according to provisional statistics from the CDC, reported in *The New York Times*.*²
- *During the same period, suicides made up 1,078—nearly 30%—of child gun deaths, according to statistics from Everytown for Gun Safety, a nationwide organization that advocates firearms safety, cited by the *Times*.*
- *An estimated 4.6 million American children live in households with at least one loaded, unlocked firearm, reports a 2022 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.*³
- *Between 2015 and 2020, there were at least 2,070 unintentional shootings by children that resulted in 765 deaths and 1,366 nonfatal injuries, according to Everytown for Gun Safety. In 2020 alone, at least 125 children ages 5 and under shot themselves or someone else.*

The Need for a Proactive Effort These statistics are certainly cause for alarm. And without proactive efforts to address gun violence and firearm safety in schools, homes and the community at-large, the trend is unlikely to reverse itself.

“...it cannot be assumed that firearm-related mortality will later revert to prepandemic levels,” wrote researchers from the University of Michigan in an analysis of CDC data. “Regardless, the increasing firearm-related mortality reflects a longer-term trend and shows that we continue to fail to protect our youth from a preventable cause of death.”⁴

A real-world example of what these statistics represent—in terms of access, safe storage, parental responsibility and the mental/emotional well-being of children—occurred in early January when a six-year-old brought a handgun to his elementary school in Virginia and shot his first-grade teacher.

In reports following the incident, *The New York Times* cited experts from academia who stressed the need for safe storage and strict access, as well as counseling and mental health support.

Dan Semenza, the director of interpersonal violence research at the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers University, said that the safest way to prevent children from using guns “is to not have a firearm in the home of a child.”

Still, he said, there were ways to limit access even with guns in the home. “You are talking about a gun locker or a gun safe, where the firearm is separate from the ammunition,” he said. “Even more safe would be having some kind of lock that is biometric,” he added, so that only a particular individual could access it, similar to using face or finger technology to log into a cellphone.

One effective, trusted place to provide education on these safety measures is pediatricians' offices, which nearly all families visit, he said. "If the pediatrician feels comfortable asking: 'Do you have a firearm in the house? Do you have access to a safe storage mechanism?'" he said, adding, "It's more preventative."⁵

The American Academy of Pediatrics, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the American Medical Association are among the many medical and health-care organizations that advocate such discussion by their associates and members with parents and guardians.

Beyond Physical Injury Gun violence at home or in the community has an impact beyond immediate physical injury, according to the CDC-Kaiser Permanente study on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). First conducted in the 1990s, the research remains among the most relevant in identifying the impact of violence. According to the study, ACEs, which include being a victim of—or witnessing— violence at home or in the community, can have lasting, negative effects on health, well-being, as well as life opportunities such as education and job potential.⁶

Adverse childhood experiences can affect students in subtle ways (inattentiveness, anxiety, poor school attendance) or in more serious and dangerous ways (frequent angry responses, aggressiveness, use of weapons to settle differences). According to the CDC, raising awareness about ACEs can help to:

- Promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments where children live, learn, and play.
- Reduce stigma around seeking help with parenting challenges or for substance misuse, depression, or suicidal thoughts.
- Change how people think about the causes of ACEs and who could help prevent them.
- Focus on community solutions.

Establishing the Task Force

Enabling local boards of education to effectively address the safety and security of our children requires an exploration of current law and regulation governing gun acquisition, programs that promote safe storage and access, available training in firearm use, and violence prevention strategies at the school and community levels.

In December 2022, NJSBA President Irene LeFebvre and Executive Director Dr. Timothy J. Purnell appointed a task force of local board of education members and experts from law enforcement and traumatic loss and counseling to explore strategies school districts may consider for implementation in their communities. The effort is part of NJSBA's long history of research on the health and safety of New Jersey's public school students.

Task Force Operations/Research Methods

The NJSBA Firearms Safety Task Force conducted its operations from January 6 through February 28, 2023. The group convened on the following dates: January 6 and 7 (introductory meetings); January 26; February 6, February 16, and February 27. Members identified programs in place in New Jersey public schools and reviewed data, reports and literature in the areas specified by the Task Force charge, including the following: the impact of gun violence on children and adolescents; practices to promote firearm safety; violence prevention strategies; trauma and mental health, and resources available from nationwide organizations.

During Task Force deliberations, two members made presentations, drawing on their expertise in their respective fields:

- **Raymond Hayducka**, chief of police for South Brunswick Township since 2005, and former president of the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police. Hayducka holds a master’s degree in criminal justice, has served as an instructor for police chiefs and ranking officers throughout the state, and has authored numerous publications on a variety of law enforcement topics. He has participated in previous NJSBA programs on school security.
- **George Scott**, Ed.S., a principal in the Center for Counseling Services, is certified in post-traumatic stress management and serves as statewide resource coordinator for the New Jersey Traumatic Loss Coalition. Scott is a former training and consultation specialist for the New Jersey Youth Suicide Project. He served as a consultant to NJSBA’s Task Force on Mental Health in the Public Schools, which issued the 2019 report, “Building a Foundation for Hope.”

Member Survey The Task Force surveyed the NJSBA membership on efforts to address gun safety and trauma/mental health. Over 83% of survey respondents felt that gun safety is an important issue in their communities. However, only 33% are aware of programs and alliances to address gun safety in their school districts and communities. Much more prevalent are structures to address trauma and mental illness, which 78% of respondents indicate are in place in their communities.

Information Sources Resources used by the Task Force to arrive at its conclusions and to develop recommendations and suggested actions include data, research studies, programs and guidance issued by government agencies and variety of organizations, as well as news media reports. Sources include the RAND Corporation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the New Jersey Gun Violence Center at Rutgers, *The New York Times*, Be Smart, the National Rifle Association, the Giffords Law Center, Northwell Health, Project ChildSafe, Everytown for Gun Safety, the National Shooting Sports Foundation, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Brady, and many others.

Sources are cited throughout the report and many of them also appear in a bibliography/resource list at the end of the document.

The NJSBA Firearms Safety Task Force divided its study into two areas:

- **PART I – Firearm Acquisition, Safe Gun Use and Secure Storage.**
- **PART II –Community Safety Alliances/Emotional and Mental Health Support/School Climate.**

Firearm Acquisition, Safe Gun Use, and Secure Storage: Findings and Conclusions

State Law and Regulation

- New Jersey’s gun ownership laws are among the nation’s most comprehensive.
- NJSBA has long supported legislation designed to protect children from gun violence, including bills now before the Legislature to require safe storage of guns in the home, S-2937/A-2215, and to raise the minimum age for all firearm purchases to 21, S-504/A-509. (Under the latter proposal, raising the minimum age for purchasing would not affect the ability of minors to use firearms under parental supervision and/or in activities such as hunting and target practice.)

Safe Gun Use and Storage

- Both the gun lobby and supporters of increased regulation over gun ownership agree on one point: The importance of secure firearm storage and the need for instruction in safe gun use.
- Firearm safety advocates, gun-owner organizations and academic researchers cite safe storage of firearms as the most effective strategy to protect children from gun injury and death.
- A 2022 report by the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers University indicates that, while most of the state’s gun owners follow safe storage procedures, a significant number does not store firearms under lock and many keep guns loaded at home.
- Although some New Jersey school districts address gun safety through alliances and programs, a survey of the NJSBA membership indicates a need for greater awareness of such initiatives among local school boards.
- Nationwide programs that provide education and information on the safe handling of firearms and effective gun storage can be adopted at the school and community levels and often include materials that can be incorporated into the instructional program and distributed to parents and guardians.

Parent and Community Action

- Parents and guardians have a critical role to play in preventing firearm deaths and injuries by ascertaining the presence of guns and the method of firearm storage in homes and other places visited by their children, and by talking with their children about safe gun practices and the potential danger of mishandling firearms.
- Awareness of safe gun use and storage can be promoted through a variety of forums and at many junctures, including school district-sponsored parent academies, student interaction with the school resource officer, law enforcement agencies, community alliances/partnerships, recreational programs, and the offices of pediatricians and other health care providers.

- Resources are available to parents and guardians on how to ask about the presence and security of guns at the homes of their children’s friends and relatives. Organizations providing support include [Northwell Health](#), Brady, which developed the [ASK \(Asking Saves Kids\)/End Family Fire campaign](#), and the NRA.

Funding Research on Gun Violence

- The federal government has dedicated \$25 million to study causes and prevention of gun violence. However, in an interview with *Governing* magazine, the lead researcher for a January 2023 study by the RAND Corporation noted that a larger appropriation is needed to identify public policies to effectively address the issue. Child advocacy groups, including the National PTA, support increased funding in this area.⁷
-

Firearm Acquisition, Safe Gun Use, and Secure Storage: Recommendations/Suggested Actions

Advocacy

1. The Task Force urges local boards of education and other school leaders to share the findings and recommendations of this report with their representatives in the state Legislature and Congress, as well as with municipal and county officials.
2. NJSBA will continue to advocate for firearm safety proposals that enable local school districts to advance the health, safety and security of their students. (The Association supports the New Jersey Safe Storage of Firearms Act, S-2937/A-2215, as well as legislation regarding the minimum age for purchasing firearms, S-504/A-509.)
3. NJSBA will support increased federal funding to research the causes and prevention of gun violence and effective public policy to address the issue.

The School Community

4. Local boards of education should use this report, as well as other resources, to review gun safety resources and programs and to identify those that meet the needs of their communities.
5. School districts should consider including information for families about safe firearm storage on their websites, in registration materials, in other communication vehicles and at in-school locations they find appropriate, such as principals, guidance counselors and school nurses offices. They may also consider working with affiliated organizations, such as PTAs, PTOs and Home-School Associations, and student government, to disseminate information.
6. Local boards of education should consider adopting resolutions that endorse school district strategies to inform families about safe firearm storage. [A sample resolution supporting district efforts to inform parents and guardians about safe gun storage and promote other firearm safety strategies is appended to this report electronically at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/board-resolution.]

7. School districts should consider developing public information campaigns on ways to protect the community from gun violence, including the safe handling and storage of firearms. The campaigns should seek community input and focus on the role of parents and guardians in ensuring gun safety.
8. Public information campaigns on gun safety may include a voluntary pledge signed by parents and guardians that attest to the following:
 - Any weapons in their home are stored safely and are not accessible to unsupervised children;
 - They will contact the homes that their children visit to determine the status of firearm security, and
 - They will welcome such contacts from families of children who visit their homes.

(Before embarking on any campaign involving the collection of sensitive information, school boards are strongly encouraged to consult with all local stakeholders and the board attorney.)

9. Boards of education that sponsor Parent Academies should use the programs as vehicles for training and information on safe gun storage and practices that promote firearm safety.

Law Enforcement and the Community At-Large

10. Boards of education should consider collaborating with local law enforcement on implementing gun safety programs available from organizations, such as Project ChildSafe, which provide guidance on safe gun storage and mechanisms to adequately secure firearms.
11. Where applicable, school districts should consider working with their local police departments to have school resource officers (SROs) address gun safety when providing instruction to students in areas such as DARE and LEAD (Law Enforcement Against Drugs). SROs are specially trained active-duty police officers or retired law enforcement officers (Class III special officers), whose role in the school is security-educator-counselor. [Sample lesson plans developed by members of the South Brunswick Police Department are appended to this report electronically at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/lesson-plans.]
12. Local school boards should also consider working with community organizations, such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H Clubs, faith-based organizations, and competitive shooting and hunter education groups to promote safe gun storage and gun-safety education.
13. School district and municipal officials should collaborate with businesses that cater to youth and provide them with information and training on gun safety.
14. Local law enforcement agencies should consider providing information on safe gun use and storage to applicants for handgun and firearm permits.
15. School districts should consider collaborative efforts with area pediatricians and other medical providers to initiate discussions with parents and guardians regarding weapons in the home and effective firearm storage. Such conversations should also help them ascertain the presence of guns and the adequacy of storage at homes that their children visit.

**Community Safety Alliances/Emotional and Mental Health Support/
School Climate:
Findings/Conclusions**

Focus on Community

- In 2020-2021, the National Center for Education Statistics recorded 146 school shootings nationwide, 93 of which resulted in death and/or injuries. The numbers represent a 240% increase in total school shootings since 2014-2015 (43) and a 166% increase in shootings that resulted in deaths and/or injuries since 2014-2015 (35).
- According to the National Center for Education Statistics, from 1992 to 2019, less than 3% of youth homicides occurred on school grounds.
- In an average week, students spend approximately 80% of their time *outside* of school, according to a 2020 analysis published by the Federal Reserve.
- These statistics illustrate the need for local boards of education to participate in, support and/or initiate community-wide programs to address the impact of gun violence. Such programs encompass students' mental and emotional health, strategies that defuse conflict, help children and adolescents overcome trauma, and enable them to build a bond of trust with caring adults.
- Limiting safety initiatives to the school building does not address the time children are not in the classroom or on campus. Establishing alliances of stakeholders, who genuinely represent the many voices found within the community, will contribute to the safety, security and well-being of our youth.
- Gun violence can affect all communities, regardless of geographic location, population density, or demographic composition. Yet, the incidence of death by firearms among young people and its causes (homicide, suicide, accident) varies by race/ethnicity, age, economic background, and other factors. Therefore, initiatives to combat gun violence and to promote firearm safety should be tailored to individual community challenges, needs and beliefs.

Focus on Schools

- A positive school climate advances student learning and helps build healthy relationships among students and trust between students and adults. Environments that do not feel physically and emotionally safe sabotage the functions essential to learning, according to Task Force member George Scott, statewide resource coordinator for the New Jersey Traumatic Loss Coalition.
- Counseling and mental health support are just as critical to student and staff safety as physical security measures. Such programs can prevent violent incidents by lessening stress among students and diffusing anger and aggression. They can also encourage emotional health among staff and administrators, enabling them to model positive behavior.
- Organizations ranging from the National PTA to the National Association of School Psychologists recommend that students have a voice in safety planning.

- Over 78% of respondents to an NJSBA membership survey issued by the Task Force indicate that their school districts had a structure in place to address trauma or mental health issues. A number of these programs are funded through the state’s School-Based Youth Services program, administered through the state Department of Children and Families. Under a restructuring to begin in 2023-2024, the state will continue funding existing School-Based Youth Services programs, while expanding mental health services to a greater population of students through the establishment of the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services Network. NJSBA supports continued state funding of existing School-Based Youth Services programs, as well as the expanded availability of services through the new Student Support Services Network.

Severely Affected Communities

- Firearm homicide rates are highest among teens and young adults 15-34 years of age and among African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic or Latino populations, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Black children and adolescents are 14 times more likely than their white peers to die by a firearm, according to an analysis of 2016-2020 CDC data by Everytown for Gun Safety. Latin/Hispanic children and adolescents are three times as likely to die by gun fire than white children and teenagers.
- Exposure to gun violence affects children physically, emotionally and socially, according to a 2021 study by Everytown for Gun Safety. It can negatively affect school performance and result in anger and withdrawal.
- Various strategies have had a positive impact in communities severely affected by gun violence. They include safe passage programs to reduce children’s exposure to gun violence when traveling to and from school; violence intervention programs, both hospital-based and street-based; cognitive behavioral therapy to change perceptions of situations that would otherwise lead to violence; and expansion of employment/economic opportunities.

Community Safety Alliances/Emotional and Mental Health Support/ School Climate: Recommendations/Suggested Actions

The Community At-Large

16. Community/Municipal Safety Alliances that include all stakeholders can identify programs to enhance the health and well-being of children and adolescents. For information on alliances, school boards should review information in this report, NJSBA’s [2019 Mental Health Task Force](#) and the 2017 [Final Report of the Task Force on Student Achievement](#).
17. School district and community partners should proactively build safe, healthy and nurturing cultures and climates through strategies, such as team building; restorative justice and social-emotional learning/character development.

18. Ensuring that all students have both an adult and a peer in school to whom they can turn in times of stress is a major component of building a safe school climate. School districts and community alliances should consider adopting programs, such as [Dylan's Wings of Change](#), which promotes empathy and youth leadership, or establishing a schoolyard/playground [Buddy Bench](#) effort that ensures a child is never alone.

The Schools

19. School districts should become familiar with services that will be available through the [New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services Network](#).
20. Local school boards should consider establishing Parent/Community Academies that serve the entire community and can provide education on gun safety, while addressing the trauma and emotional challenges that may face children and adolescents, their families and the adults who work with youth.
21. School boards should continue to emphasize social-emotional learning/character development in enabling children to learn in a safe, secure and respectful environment. The Task Force suggests that school leaders review information and resources from [CASEL](#) (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) and the Rutgers [Social-Emotional Learning Character Development Lab](#), directed by Dr. Maurice Elias. (SEL and the work of Dr. Elias have been highlighted in several previous NJSBA research reports, notably "[Building a Foundation for Hope](#)" the [Final Report of the Task Force on Student Achievement](#) and the 2014 report, "[What Makes Schools Safe?](#)")
22. Local school districts should consider awareness training for all staff about indicators of suicide and strategies that interrupt the types of thinking and behavior that could result in tragedy. Several resources are included in the document, "Creating Healthy and Supportive School Climates that Support the Well-being of Students and Mitigate Risk," developed by Task Force member George Scott and attached to this report at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/healthy-school-climate.
23. School districts should ensure student participation in safety planning and encourage students to take responsibility for their part in maintaining safe school environments.

Severely Affected Communities

24. In communities that experience high levels of gun violence, local boards of education should ensure that they support and, as appropriate, participate in programs that directly and indirectly improve the health and safety of children. These may include violence intervention programs, safe passage initiatives, and efforts to expand employment and economic opportunities. Partners would include municipal governments, law enforcement, the faith-based community, public health agencies, medical providers, and social service organizations.

Moving Forward

An Overarching Recommendation While the desire to keep our children and staff safe is one shared by all boards of education, there is not a singular path to reaching this goal. Recognizing the varied needs of communities across New Jersey, the NJSBA Firearms Safety Task Force has identified a wide range of processes, programs and practices to guide district efforts.

In addition to the suggested actions for local school boards, the Task Force has one overarching recommendation: *That every board of education review the report and determine those strategies that will best enhance safety in their communities.*

Importance of Local Determination The best decisions for public school students—including those affecting the health and safety of our students—are made closest to the schoolhouse. NJSBA is committed to local school board determination of processes, programs and practices that will work best in their communities. That principle underscores the work of the Firearms Safety Task Force.

Beyond Polarization In producing a fair and balanced report, the Task Force focused on the crucial need to address the impact of gun violence and injury while recognizing the legitimate interests of those gun owners who possess firearms for hunting, sport or safety. The final report includes strategies that can be embraced by boards of education throughout New Jersey to make our schools and communities safer.

Advocating for Student Health and Safety NJSBA will continue to assess proposed firearm safety measures in the Legislature and Congress in light of Association policy set by the Delegate Assembly. And it will advocate for legislation and regulation that enable local school districts to advance the health, safety and security of their students.

Local boards of education and other school leaders are strongly encouraged to share the findings and recommendations of the Final Report of the Task Force on Firearm Safety when meeting with their representatives in the state Legislature and Congress, as well as with municipal and county officials.

NJSBA's Previous Research

Over nearly five decades, the New Jersey School Boards Association has built an exceptional body of research, promoting school security and safety, and the physical and emotional well-being of students and staff.

Projects include a 1978 report on Violence and Vandalism in the Schools, the recommendations and findings of which were later reflected in state Administrative Code on reporting and responding to incidents in schools. Following the Columbine school shooting in 1999, an NJSBA committee recommended a series of policies that were adopted by the Delegate Assembly and continue to guide Association strategies in addressing legislation and regulation on school safety.

Within the past decade, the extensive work of NJSBA task forces and committees on a wide range of issues includes three reports that are especially critical to the efforts of the current Firearms Safety Task Force.

What Makes Schools Safe? Issued in 2014, after a year of research and deliberation, the report of a 15-member School Security Task Force included 84 recommendations on topics ranging from the proper role of the school resource officer to emergency response procedures, target hardening and promoting a healthy school climate. The task force was appointed in the months following the December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. It consulted with experts in law enforcement, architecture, juvenile justice, school climate, and state procedures on emergency planning. (The report is accessible at www.njsba.org/schoolsecurity2014.)

Final Report of the NJSBA Task Force on Student Achievement Published in 2017, this 107-page report that includes research and resources on the school board's role in advancing teaching and learning, the impact of poverty, and the importance of early childhood education and social-emotional learning, with 83 recommendations for action. (The report is accessible at www.njsba.org/student-achievement2017.)

Final Report of the NJSBA School Security Committee A 2018 review and update of *What Makes Schools Safe?* included 14 recommendations in areas such as planning, response and recovery; security personnel; communication, notification and detection; cybersecurity; physical security and building access; funding; Election Day security; school climate, and mental health services. (The report is accessible at www.njsba.org/schoolsecurity2018.)

Building a Foundation for Hope The 2019 report of the NJSBA Task Force on Mental Health Services in the Public Schools provided local boards of education with more than 70 recommendations, along with guidance and best practices, in areas such as crisis intervention, social-emotional learning/character development, community alliances, and training/professional development. (The report is accessible at www.njsba.org/building-a-foundation-for-hope.)

The 2023 NJSBA Firearms Safety Task Force has identified programs and practices and developed suggested actions for school boards that build upon the work of these earlier study groups.

PART I:

**Firearm Acquisition and Possession,
Secure Storage, and Safe Gun Use**

The Task Force considered current New Jersey law governing the acquisition and possession of firearms, along with training and safety requirements. In addition to reviewing relevant statutes and regulations, the study group directed attention to resources and programs available to New Jersey communities to promote the safe and responsible use and storage of firearms.

PART I: Firearm Acquisition and Possession, Secure Storage and Safe Gun Use

Acquiring a Firearm in New Jersey

Application Process To obtain a firearm in New Jersey, an individual must apply for a permit to purchase a handgun or a Firearms Purchase ID card (rifles, shotguns) from local law enforcement or the State Police.⁸

Applicants must provide extensive personal information, as well as consent to a mental health records search. Both permits require a background check, submission of fingerprints, waiver of confidentiality relating to institutional confinement for a psychiatric condition, and references from “two reputable citizens” personally acquainted with the applicant.

Under New Jersey law, an individual must be 21 years of age to purchase a handgun and 18 years of age to acquire other legal firearms, such as rifles or shotguns.⁹ Although the statute restricts the purchase of firearms, it allows their use by individuals less than 21 or 18 years of age for activities such as hunting or target practice and/or under the supervision of parents. NJSBA supports a current proposal (A-509/S-504) to increase the minimum purchase age for all firearms to 21.

Once the application is completed, the chief of police—or Superintendent of the State Police if the municipality does not have a full-time department—conducts an investigation and either approves or disapproves the application.

If an applicant qualifies for a permit to purchase a handgun or a Firearms Purchase ID card, the document shall be issued within 30 days from the date of receipt of the application, or within 45 days if the applicant is not a New Jersey resident.¹⁰

Restrictions State law prohibits certain persons from having weapons or ammunition.¹¹ The restriction applies to individuals convicted of a crime or a disorderly persons offense involving domestic violence, persons confined for a mental disorder, and those suffering from substance abuse disorders, among other prohibitions.

Training A 2022 statute requires new applicants for gun permits to complete a course in the lawful and safe handling and storage of firearms within four years of the date of application. The training course must be one approved by the Superintendent of the State Police.¹² (The training requirement does not apply to individuals who secured gun permits prior to July 5, 2022, the effective date of the new law.)

‘Red Flag Law’ In 2018, New Jersey enacted the Extreme Risk Protective Order Act ([P.L. 2018, c.35](#)), which authorizes the seizure of firearms, upon court order, from individuals deemed to pose a threat to the community. It was part of an extensive package of gun safety bills approved that year and supported by NJSBA. The law went into effect in September 2019.

A report about the law's implementation, published by *NJ Advance Media for NJ.com*, indicated that, in the five months after the law's effective date, close to 200 court orders were issued.

[The statute] allows a law enforcement officer, family or household member to submit a petition to state Superior Court showing why a judge should issue an order to keep guns away from someone who potentially poses a danger of causing bodily injury to themselves or to others.

If the judge determines there is "good cause" to remove the guns, the judge will initially issue a temporary extreme risk protection order and a search warrant [will be] executed to recover the guns, ammunition and firearms identification card from the person.¹³

Once a protective order is issued, the individual is also prohibited from purchasing a firearm or ammunition and is prohibited from possessing the requisite permits.

A related statute, the Preventive Firearms Seizure Act ([P.L. 2018, c.34](#)), requires law enforcement, upon court order, to seize a firearm in the possession of a person determined by certain licensed health care professionals to be likely to engage in conduct that poses a threat of serious harm to the patient or another person.

New Jersey Law: Firearm Access/Storage

Access by Minor New Jersey statutes impose a penalty in situations where a minor (under the age of 16) gains access to a loaded firearm.

A person who knows or reasonably should know that a minor is likely to gain access to a loaded firearm at a premises under the person's control commits a disorderly persons offense* if a minor gains access to the firearm, unless the person:

- (1) Stores the firearm in a securely locked box or container;
- (2) Stores the firearm in a location which a reasonable person would believe to be secure; or
- (3) Secures the firearm with a trigger lock.¹⁴

* A disorderly persons offense carries a penalty of up to six months imprisonment, a \$1,000 fine, or both.

In addition, state law requires firearm dealers to provide the following notice to all purchasers and transferees:

IT IS A CRIMINAL OFFENSE, PUNISHABLE BY A FINE AND IMPRISONMENT, FOR AN ADULT TO LEAVE A LOADED FIREARM WITHIN EASY ACCESS OF A MINOR.¹⁵

Safe Storage Act A bill introduced in the current legislative session would expand on existing law by specifying firearm storage requirements, extending liability to situations in which an adult gains access to an unsecured firearm and causes death or injury, and increasing penalties for non-compliance.

Under the legislation, titled the New Jersey Safe Storage of Firearms Act ([A-2215/S-2937](#)), gun owners would have to store firearms unloaded in a gun safe or a securely locked box or container. Ammunition would have to be stored separately. Failing to store firearms in a safe manner would result in community service (first offense) and a disorderly persons offense (subsequent violations). NJSBA supports the legislation.

In addition, if an improperly stored firearm were accessed by another individual and resulted in serious bodily injury or death, the owner would be guilty of a crime of the fourth degree, which carries a penalty of up to 18 months imprisonment and a \$10,000 fine, or both.

Evaluating New Jersey Gun Laws

Among Nation's Most Effective The [Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence](#) gives New Jersey a grade of "A" in the strength of its gun laws, one of only two states to earn the highest ranking.

"New Jersey was the first state to comprehensively regulate untraceable and undetectable firearms, or 'ghost guns', and is a leader on many other gun safety policies," reads the organization's website. "In 2020, New Jersey had the third-lowest gun death rate in the country and the nation's second-lowest crime gun export rate. To further strengthen New Jersey's gun laws, legislators could increase funding to proven community violence intervention programs and raise the minimum age for purchasing firearms."¹⁶

Among strengths of New Jersey's laws are gun-owner licensing, child access prevention and community violence intervention funding. Giffords identifies "gaps" in minimum-age requirements as an area in need of attention.

On a nationwide level, a January 2023 RAND Corporation report found moderate evidence that increasing the age at which an individual could purchase a handgun tends to reduce suicide among young people. It also found [stronger] evidence that child-access-prevention laws reduce firearm homicides and self-injury.¹⁷

Handgun Carry Standards On December 22, 2022, Gov. Phil Murphy signed legislation (A-4769/S-3214) to strengthen the state's handgun-carry standards. The statute ([P.L.2022, c.131](#)) establishes a list of "sensitive places" where concealed carry is not permissible, including a school, college, university, school bus, nursery school and preschool, as well as youth sporting events and recreational facilities. NJSBA supported the legislation.¹⁸

The legislation followed the U.S. Supreme Court's June 2022 ruling in *New York State Rifle Pistol Association Inc. v. Bruen*, which struck down a statute requiring applicants in New York to show "proper cause" to carry a handgun in public.

The recent New Jersey statute ([P.L.2022, c.131](#)) is being challenged in federal district court.

On January 9, a federal district court judge placed a temporary restraining order on enforcement of certain provisions of the statute while legal proceedings continue.¹⁹ A subsequent district court ruling, on January 30, blocked additional provisions of the law from being enforced. However, a report in *Politico*²⁰ indicated that the court orders leave in place existing criminal code prohibitions against possession of weapons on school grounds.²¹

Firearms on School Grounds

In addition to criminal code provisions prohibiting possession of weapons on school grounds, an education statute—New Jersey’s Zero-Tolerance for Guns Act of 1995²²—requires that any pupil found guilty of possession of a firearm on school property be removed from the regular education program for one year.

Under state regulation, any school employee with reason to believe that a firearm or other deadly weapon has been unlawfully brought onto school property must report the suspicion to the principal.²³

Federal law, including the Every Child Succeeds Act, requires school districts to have disciplinary policies prohibiting the illegal possession of weapons on school grounds.²⁴

Firearms in the Home

The New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers University provides the following information on gun ownership and storage:

- 1.45 million New Jerseyans (age 18+) live in homes where firearms are typically kept.
- Two-thirds of New Jersey firearm owners always store firearms in their home.
- The large majority (71.5%) of New Jersey firearm owners always or nearly always store firearms with a locking device (e.g., cable lock) in place, *but approximately 15% never or only occasionally do so.*
- Over half of all New Jersey firearm owners always store their firearms in a locked location (e.g., a gun safe), *but approximately 1 in 4 never do so.*
- The large majority (70.3%) of New Jersey firearm owners never store their firearms loaded, *but 1 in 5 always or nearly always do so.*
- New Jersey firearm owners vary widely in their tendency to store firearms within reach of ammunition (e.g., 35.7% never do so, 25.3% always do so.). *The more quickly an individual can access ammunition, the greater the odds of intentional or unintentional firearm injury or death,* according to the Research Center.
- Just over 70% of New Jersey firearm owners never store their firearms in their vehicles. More than 10% of New Jersey firearm owners always store firearms in their vehicles. *This can increase the risk for firearm theft and firearm-involved road rage incidents.*
- Although nearly three-quarters of New Jersey firearm owners never carry firearms outside the home, a small minority (8.2%) always or nearly always do so.²⁵

Secure Firearm Storage: The Most Critical Step

Regardless of location or political values, there seems to be a nearly universal agreement that if people own guns...they should be stored safely. – Shannon Watts, founder of **Moms Demand Action**, quoted in Education Week.²⁶

- It is always an adult’s responsibility to prevent unauthorized access to guns, not a curious child’s responsibility to avoid guns. That means always keeping all firearms locked, unloaded, and stored separately from ammunition. – **Be SMART**, “Talking to Your Children about Guns”²⁷
- You are responsible for making sure your firearms are not accessible to anyone but yourself and other authorized personnel, especially curious children! – **NRA Family**²⁸
- Storing firearms safely in a gun safe, unloaded, separate from the ammunition, or using a gun lock or trigger lock, can help prevent firearm injuries and death. Gun safety devices are readily available.” – **Northwell Health**, Center for Gun Violence Prevention²⁹
- Your responsibility is ensuring that unsupervised children cannot encounter loaded firearms. The precautions you take must be completely effective. Anything less invites tragedy and is a serious violation of your responsibility as a gun owner. – **Project ChildSafe**³⁰

A July 2022 essay published by the RAND Corporation underscores the consistent message from advocates at various points on the spectrum of the gun ownership-gun licensing debate.

Summarizing recommendations of groups ranging from the National Shooting Sports Foundation and the U.S. Concealed Carry Association to Everytown for Gun Safety and the American Academy of Pediatrics, the author states, “...firearms should be stored locked and unloaded, and stored separately from ammunition, which...should also be stored locked.” [Emphasis added.]³¹

Principles of Safe Gun Storage Project ChildSafe, an initiative of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, warns that “[h]iding a gun in a closet, drawer or similar location is not safe storage” and offers four tenets of firearm security:

1. Unloaded firearms should be stored in a locked cabinet, safe, gun vault or storage case. The storage location should be inaccessible to children.
2. Gun locking devices render firearms inoperable and can be used in addition to locked storage. If firearms are disassembled, parts should be securely stored in separate locations.
3. Ammunition should be stored in a locked location separate from firearms.



4. Thoroughly double check firearms to confirm that they are unloaded when you remove them from storage. Accidents could occur if a family member borrows a gun and returns it to storage while still loaded.³²

Availability of Storage Devices In cooperation with Project ChildSafe, [more than 125 local law enforcement agencies](#) in New Jersey offer gun safety kits, including gun locks, for free. The Borough of Madison in Morris County, for example, has partnered with Project ChildSafe to promote safe gun handling and storage and makes gun locks available to all residents at all times at its public safety building.

“Project ChildSafe...has distributed millions of firearm safety kits throughout the country. The program is funded by a U.S. Department of Justice grant, with additional funding provided by the firearms industry,” explains a gun safety page on the borough’s website. “Each kit contains safety information and a cable-style gun lock. The lock fits most types of handguns, rifles and shotguns. The goal is to prevent a child or other unauthorized person from accessing a firearm in your home.”³³

Best Approach A 2018 study by the Division of Advanced Practice Nursing at the Rutgers University School of Nursing found that secure storage provides safety, even if the effectiveness of gun-safety education erodes.³⁴

“Gun safety programs do not improve the likelihood that children will not handle firearms in an unsupervised situation,” concludes the report. In an opinion article that referenced the study, one of its authors, Dr. Cheryl Holly, underscored the importance of firearm security.

“Until we determine more effective ways to teach children to adhere to gun safety, the two best solutions are to not have guns in the house, or to ensure that they are locked away and the key or code cannot be found,” she wrote.³⁵

Focal Point: Pediatrician’s Office A key player in promoting firearm safety and secure gun storage can be the medical community. Numerous public health and medical organizations believe that the pediatricians have a critical role to play in making parents and guardians aware of the importance of safe firearm storage.

“Pediatric visits offer a key opportunity to educate parents about safe firearm storage. Yet few primary care clinicians provide firearm safety interventions, representing a missed opportunity,” states an abstract describing a research project at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention.³⁶ A 2021 research report³⁷ by the University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine indicates that parents are receptive to such discussion, showing “a possible avenue for reducing the number of firearm injuries and deaths suffered by children in the United States.”³⁸

A number of medical organizations offer physicians guidance on addressing the issue of gun safety with parents.

In a January 2023 article, published by *CNN Health*, Dr. Lois Kaye Lee, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Council on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention, noted that the Academy has free [educational modules](#)³⁹ for pediatricians to guide them on addressing firearm safety with families.

“This shouldn’t be considered as something extra; it should be considered as part of the work that we do every day around injury prevention, be it around firearms, child passenger safety and suicide prevention,” Lee said.⁴⁰

The Violence Prevention Initiative at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia offers guidance to the medical community on addressing gun safety issues with families.

“Placing this conversation in the context of other anticipatory guidance—about child-proofing a home to prevent falls, poisoning, drowning, or burns—is a way to have an effective conversation about keeping children safe generally,” wrote Joel A. Fein, M.D., the program’s co-director, in a 2017 article. “If gun removal is not an option for the family, don’t judge. Instead, talk about safe storage of guns and ammunition and why these maneuvers are so critical. Avoid talking about gun rights and gun control; focus on children and best practices to keep them safe.”⁴¹

When Your Child Plans to Visits a Friend’s House: Ask About Firearms

“Every year in the United States, 35,000 people are killed and 90,000 people are injured by gun violence. Family fire [i.e., a shooting involving an improperly stored or misused gun found in the home] accounts for the majority of these tragedies.” – ASK to End Family Fire, Brady⁴²



“Ask if there is an unlocked gun where your child plays. This question can save your child’s life. If the answer is yes, ask if it can be locked up (unloaded, with the ammunition locked separately). If the gun isn’t stored safely, your child shouldn’t play there.” – Claire McCarthy, M.D., Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School.⁴³

Protecting children from firearm injury doesn’t stop with safe storage in the child’s home. Medical, gun-owner and child advocacy organizations all stress that parents should ask about the presence of firearms, and the adequacy of storage, before playdates, birthday parties and other gatherings at the homes of their children’s friends and classmates.

For some parents, that might be a difficult question to pose to neighbors and acquaintances, but there is no shortage of advice on how to overcome any hesitancy.

The Northwell Health Center for Gun Violence Prevention, for example, offers [several strategies](#) parents and guardians can use to ask about the presence and storage of firearms when dropping off a child at a friend’s house. They include attributing the question to the child’s pediatrician or including it with queries about health and safety concerns (pets, allergies, swimming pool), among other approaches. “You should never feel uncomfortable asking about anything that might pose a danger to your child,” Northwell advises.⁴⁴

Northwell Health
<https://youtu.be/xjeY6-Ls0qM>



A similar message comes from the NRA Explore website, which features a [video](#), “Talking to Other Parents,” in which mothers explain why there should be no hesitancy in broaching the subject. “There are lots of questions when meeting new parents: Do you have a swimming pool? Will you be home? Any food allergies? But often it's not the norm to discuss if there are firearms in the home.”

Over 20 years ago, the Brady organization began the [ASK \(Asking Saves Kids\)](#) initiative as part of its campaign, “End Family Fire.” The program operates in collaboration with the American Academy of Pediatrics.



Parents and guardians ask all sorts of questions before they allow their children to visit other homes; they ask about pets in the house, discuss allergies and Internet access, and ask questions about supervision. As part of our End Family Fire campaign, ASK encourages parents and guardians to add one more question to this conversation: “**Is there an unlocked gun in your house?**”

- Ask “Is there an unlocked gun where my child will play?” before sending your child to a playdate, caretaker, or relative’s home.
- Have your teens ask about guns in the home before going on a babysitting job or entering a new group housing situation.
- And especially ask about guns in the home if you know someone is in crisis and at risk of harming themselves or others.⁴⁵

Other groups, including Be Smart for Kids and Project ChildSafe, also provide direction to parents on ascertaining if guns are present and stored safely in locations visited by their children.

Educating Children on What to Do if They Find a Gun

How should a child respond when coming across a firearm? Several organizations provide guidance to parents and guardians on having conversations with children and adolescents on this subject.

Be SMART: Always a Dangerous Situation “Make sure they understand that any situation where there’s an unsupervised gun is a dangerous situation,” reads an [information sheet](#), published by Be SMART. The document offers several points on addressing the issue of gun safety with young people, including:

- Make it a part of your regular conversation.
- For young children: Keep the language simple; for example: “If you see a gun, don’t touch it. Tell an adult right away.”
- For adolescents: “Tell them not to listen to a friend who says a gun is unloaded or otherwise safe.”
- Give your teen strategies to get out of a situation where a gun is present.
- Assure them that it’s OK to ask people about the presence of unsecured guns in other homes they may be visiting, but offer to do it for them if they don’t feel comfortable.⁴⁶

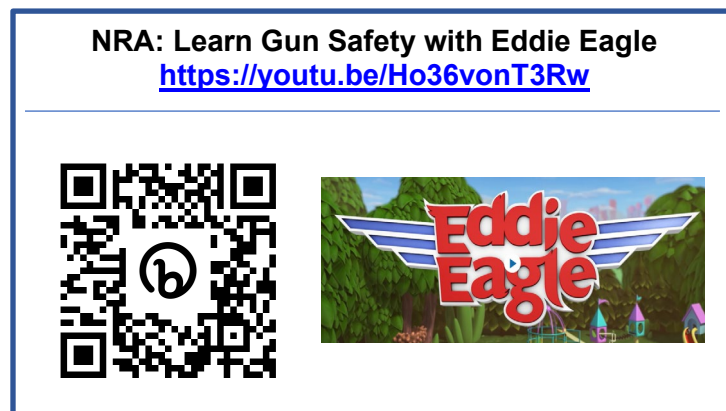
Project ChildSafe, a program of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, offers [resources for educators, parents, guardians and students](#), including an elementary-school lesson plan, “McGuff® Talks to Students About Gun Safety,” and [a gun-safety pledge](#) to be signed by students:

- I will not handle guns without permission from a grown-up that I know.
- I will never play with guns.
- I will not go snooping or allow my friends to go snooping for guns in the house.
- If I find a gun, even if it looks like a toy, I will not touch it; I will tell a grown-up I know right away.
- I will obey the rules of safe gun handling.⁴⁷

Other Project ChildSafe resources include a guide, “[Understanding Youth Mental Health and Preventing Unauthorized Access to Firearms](#),” published in consultation with the American foundation for Suicide Prevention, a five-and-a-half-minute video instructing parents and guardians on how they can talk to their children about gun safety, ten tips for firearm safety in the home, and a detailed brochure on safe storage and handling.

NRA’s Eddie Eagle The NRA established [Eddie Eagle GunSafe®](#) more than 30 years ago. The program offers information on firearm safety to parents, law enforcement, community groups and educators. It advises adults to give the following direction to children on what to do if they encounter a firearm:

- STOP! This first step is crucial. Stopping first allows your child the time he or she needs to remember the rest of the safety instructions.
- Don’t Touch: A firearm that is not touched or disturbed is unlikely to be fired and otherwise endanger your child or other people.
- Run Away: This removes the temptation to touch the firearm as well as the danger that another person may negligently cause it to fire.
- Tell A Grown-up: Children should seek a trustworthy adult, neighbor, relative or teacher – if a parent or guardian is not available.⁴⁸



The Proper Handling of Firearms

A wide range of resources are available to parents, guardians and school districts on the safe handling of firearms in sports programs and hunting. They range from the Scholastic Shooting Sports Foundation to the Boy Scouts of America, National 4-H, the NRA, and the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife.

Developed in cooperation with the [NRA](#), the Boy Scout's [National Shooting Sports Manual](#) provides details on the organization's approach to safety and skill-building in its age-appropriate shooting programs. Its "[Rules for Safe Gun Handling](#)" direct troop leaders to provide the following guidance to the Scouts:

- ALWAYS keep the gun pointed in a safe direction.
- ALWAYS keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot.
- ALWAYS keep the gun unloaded until ready to use.
- Know your target and what is beyond.
- Know how to use the gun safely.
- Be sure the gun is safe to operate.
- Use only the correct ammunition for your gun.
- Wear eye and ear protection as appropriate.
- Never use alcohol or over-the-counter prescriptions or other drugs before or while shooting.
- Store guns so they are not accessible to unauthorized persons.

The [Scholastic Shooting Sports Federation](#) is a non-profit educational-athletic organization that provides shooting-sports education and opportunities to school-age youth. It offers youth development programs that "use shooting sports to teach and demonstrate sportsmanship, responsibility, honesty, ethics, integrity, teamwork and other positive life skills."

The National Shooting Sports Foundation cites several [youth and college programs](#) focused on recreation and "a safe and secure knowledge of firearm usage." These include the following:

- [National 4-H Shooting Sports](#) – The focus of all 4-H programs is the development of youths as individuals and as responsible and productive citizens. In 4-H Shooting Sports programs, young people learn marksmanship, the safe and responsible use of firearms, and the principles of hunting and archery.
- [AIM \(Academics, Integrity, Marksmanship\)](#) is the official youth program of the Amateur Trapshooting Association. The program allows elementary through college-age shooters the chance to compete in registered competition on a level playing field either as a team or as an individual.
- [Scholastic Clay Target Program](#), sponsored by the Scholastic Shooting Sports Federation, provides youth in grades 12 and under with team competition in trap, skit and sporting clay shoots. "The ultimate goal is to instill in young participants a commitment to safe firearm handling, teamwork and leadership."
- [USA Youth Education in Shooting Sports](#) develops and supports foundations and associations that sponsor events, competitions and wildlife habitat and conservation programs that promote safe firearm handling, competitive shooting skills, and outdoor conservation activities.
- [USA Clay Target League](#) offers trap, skeet, sporting clays, and 5-stand programs as an extracurricular co-ed activity to high schools and post-secondary schools nationwide. The League's priorities, in order of importance, are safety, fun, and marksmanship.

Hunter Education and Licensing The [New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife](#) issues several types of hunting licenses, including youth licenses, apprentice licenses and rifle permits.

To obtain a youth license, an applicant must be 10 years of age, must complete an [online hunter education program](#) and register for an [in-person mandatory live-fire hunter education session](#). Hunters under 14 years of age must have permission from a parent or legal guardian to obtain a license. They must also be accompanied by a licensed adult (age 21 or older) when hunting.

Possible Steps for Local School Boards

Inform the Community about Gun Safety A December 2022 article in *Education Week*⁴⁹ noted that an increasing number of school boards throughout the nation have made commitments to inform families about safe firearm storage practices. Many have also approved resolutions indicating support for school and district efforts to distribute information on gun safety.

“...it does keep the issue front-and-center, on people’s minds, and could help normalize conversations about firearm safety,” the founder of Moms Demand Action told *Education Week*.

NJSBA has developed a sample resolution tailored to New Jersey. The document can be modified to reflect local beliefs and practices. It describes procedures for distributing information about firearm storage and safety through district communication vehicles, at registration, at various locations in the schools, and through affiliated organizations. The resolution also expresses support for school- and community-based programs that provide counseling and mental health support, reduce conflict, and promote a healthy school climate. [The sample resolution is appended to this report electronically at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/board-resolution.]

Include in Instruction Firearm safety, including secure gun storage, may also be addressed through existing school programs, without placing an undue burden on the curriculum. A number of organizations, including Project ChildSafe and the NRA’s Eddie Eagle Program, offer information that can be incorporated into health education and other programs.

During the Task Force’s February 6 meeting, member Raymond Hayducka, the South Brunswick police chief, said that instruction on secure gun storage and firearm safety could be addressed by school resource officers, whose responsibilities include education and counseling, along with security.

At the group’s February 16 meeting, he provided two lesson plans, each for a single 30- to 45-minute unit for elementary and middle/high school classes. [The sample lesson plans are appended to this document electronically at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/lesson-plans.]

Chief Hayducka also shared a presentation, “Gun Safety for Kids,” that could be adapted for instructional use. [The presentation is appended to this report electronically at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/gun-safety-for-kids.]

Advocate Safe Storage Local boards of education may also wish to express support for safe storage legislation to their state senators and Assembly representatives. For example, a current proposal, New Jersey Safe Storage of Firearms Act ([S-2937/A-2215](#)), would establish specific gun-storage requirements and increase penalties for non-compliance.

Findings and Conclusions:

Firearm Acquisition, Safe Gun Use, and Secure Storage

State Law and Regulation

- New Jersey's gun ownership laws are among the nation's most comprehensive.
- NJSBA has long supported legislation designed to protect children from gun violence, including bills now before the Legislature to require safe storage of guns in the home, S-2937/A-2215, and to raise the minimum age for all firearm purchases to 21, S-504/A-509. (Under the latter proposal, raising the minimum age for purchasing would not affect the ability of minors to use firearms under parental supervision and/or in activities such as hunting and target practice.)

Safe Gun Use and Storage

- Both the gun lobby and supporters of increased regulation over gun ownership agree on one point: The importance of secure firearm storage and the need for instruction in safe gun use.
- Firearm safety advocates, gun-owner organizations and academic researchers all cite safe storage of firearms as the most effective strategy to protect children from gun injury and death.
- A 2022 report by the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers University indicates that, while most of the state's gun owners follow safe storage procedures, a significant number does not store firearms under lock and many keep guns loaded at home.
- Although some New Jersey school districts address gun safety through alliances and programs, a survey of the NJSBA membership indicates a need for greater awareness of such initiatives among local school boards.
- Nationwide programs that provide education and information on the safe handling of firearms and effective gun storage can be adopted at the school and community levels and often include materials that can be incorporated into the instructional program and distributed to parents and guardians.

Parent and Community Action

- Parents and guardians have a critical role to play in preventing firearm deaths and injuries by ascertaining the presence of guns and the method of firearm storage in homes and other places visited by their children, and by talking with their children about safe gun practices and the potential danger of mishandling firearms.
- Awareness of safe gun use and storage can be promoted through a variety of forums and at many junctures, including school district-sponsored parent academies, student interaction with the school resource officer, law enforcement agencies, community alliances/partnerships, recreational programs, and the offices of pediatricians and other health care providers.

- Resources are available to parents and guardians on how to ask about the presence and security of guns at the homes of their children’s friends and relatives. Organizations providing support include [Northwell Health](#), Brady, which developed the [ASK \(Asking Saves Kids\)/End Family Fire campaign](#), and the NRA.

Funding Research on Gun Violence

- The federal government has dedicated \$25 million to study causes and prevention of gun violence. However, in an interview with *Governing* magazine, the lead researcher for a January 2023 study by the RAND Corporation noted that a larger appropriation is needed to identify public policies to effectively address the issue. Child advocacy groups, including the National PTA, support increased funding in this area.⁵⁰

Recommendations/Suggested Actions:

Firearm Acquisition, Safe Gun Use, and Secure Storage:

Advocacy

1. The Task Force urges local boards of education and other school leaders to share the findings and recommendations of this report with their representatives in the state Legislature and Congress, as well as with municipal and county officials.
2. NJSBA will continue to advocate for firearm safety proposals that enable local school districts to advance the health, safety and security of their students. (The Association supports the New Jersey Safe Storage of Firearms Act, S-2937/A-2215, as well as legislation regarding the minimum age for purchasing firearms, S-504/A-509.)
3. NJSBA will support increased federal funding to research the causes and prevention of gun violence and effective public policy to address the issue.

The School Community

4. Local boards of education should use this report, as well as other resources, to review gun safety resources and programs and to identify those that meet the needs of their communities.
5. School districts should consider including information for families about safe firearm storage on their websites, in registration materials, in other communication vehicles and at in-school locations they find appropriate, such as principals, guidance counselors and school nurses offices. They may also consider working with affiliated organizations, such as PTAs, PTOs and Home-School Associations, and student government, to disseminate information.
6. Local boards of education should consider adopting resolutions that endorse school district strategies to inform families about safe firearm storage. [A sample resolution supporting district efforts to inform parents and guardians about safe gun storage and promote other firearm safety strategies is appended to this report electronically at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/board-resolution.]

7. School districts should consider developing public information campaigns on ways to protect the community from gun violence, including the safe handling and storage of firearms. The campaigns should seek community input and focus on the role of parents and guardians in ensuring gun safety.
8. Public information campaigns on gun safety may include a voluntary pledge signed by parents that attest to the following:
 - Any weapons in their home are stored safely and are not accessible to unsupervised children;
 - They will contact the homes that their children visit to determine the status of firearm security, and
 - They will welcome such contacts from families of children who visit their homes.

(Before embarking on any campaign involving the collection of sensitive information, school boards are strongly encouraged to consult with all local stakeholders and the board attorney.)

9. Boards of education that sponsor Parent Academies should use the programs as vehicles for training and information on safe gun storage and practices that promote firearm safety.

Law Enforcement and the Community At-Large

10. Boards of education should consider collaborating with local law enforcement on implementing gun safety programs available from organizations, such as Project ChildSafe, which provide guidance on safe gun storage and mechanisms to adequately secure firearms.
11. Where applicable, school districts should consider working with their local police departments to have school resource officers (SROs) address gun safety when providing instruction to students in areas such as DARE and LEAD (Law Enforcement Against Drugs). SROs are specially trained active-duty police officers or retired law enforcement officers (Class III special officers), whose role in the school is security-educator-counselor. [Sample lesson plans developed by members of the South Brunswick Police Department are appended to this report electronically at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/lesson-plans.]
12. Local school boards should also consider working with community organizations, such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H Clubs, faith-based organizations, and competitive shooting and hunter education groups to promote safe gun storage and gun-safety education.
13. School district and municipal officials should collaborate with businesses that cater to youth and provide them with information and training on gun safety.
14. Local law enforcement agencies should consider providing information on safe gun use and storage to applicants for handgun and firearm permits.
15. School districts should consider collaborative efforts with area pediatricians and other medical providers to initiate discussions with parents and guardians regarding weapons in the home and effective firearm storage. Such conversations should also help them ascertain the presence of guns and the adequacy of storage at homes that their children visit.

PART II:

**Community Safety Alliances/
Emotional and Mental Health Support/
School Climate**

The Task Force considered research on gun violence prevention and the effectiveness of counseling/support programs and intervention strategies both school-based and community-wide in building a safe and healthy environment for children.

PART II: Community Safety Alliances/Emotional and Mental Health Support/ School Climate

The May 2022 tragedy in Uvalde, Texas—like the horrific shootings in Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, and too many others before—compelled school leaders to evaluate the policies, procedures and building-security modifications in place to ensure students’ safety.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) underscore the importance of ongoing review and updating of security measures. Nationwide, in 2020-2021, the NCES recorded 146 school shootings*, 93 of which resulted in death and/or injuries. These numbers represent a 240% increase in total school shootings since 2014-2015 (43) and a 166% increase in shootings that resulted in deaths and/or injuries since 2014-2015 (35).⁵¹

* “School shootings” include all incidents in which a gun is brandished or fired or a bullet hits school property for any reason, regardless of the number of victims (including zero), time, day of the week, or reason (e.g., planned attack, accidental, domestic violence, gang-related.)

The Task Force believes that local boards of education and their administrations should continually review school security measures, using as reference NJSBA’s [2014](#) and [2018](#) school security reports, as well as information from organizations such as [Sandy Hook Promise](#) and the [National PTA](#) and government agencies, including the [New Jersey Department of Education](#).

“Schools are the microcosms for the communities they serve.” – Dr. Marion White-Hood, career educator and Milken Award winner.⁵²

Gun-violence prevention must extend beyond the schoolyard. During the 27 school years that ended in 2018-2019, only 3% of youth homicides took place on school grounds, according to the NCES.⁵³ Consider also that children and adolescents spend the vast majority of their time outside of school: A 2020 analysis published by the Federal Reserve indicates that students spend approximately 80% of the typical day away from school.⁵⁴

A September 2022 article in the education news publication *Chalkbeat*⁵⁵ focused on community-wide violence prevention programs in Newark. In an interview, a veteran teacher said he could name 40 students who had died by gun violence, “[He] realized long ago that the only way to protect his students is to stop the shootings where they occur — not in his school, but in the neighborhoods around it.”

A Whole-Community Focus

The Task Force strongly encourages local boards of education to participate in, support and/or initiate community-wide programs that address the gun violence and its impact on students. Municipal or community alliances have proved to be effective in helping to meet the mental, emotional, social and academic needs of youth. Such endeavors can also help stem the roots of violence.

Safety Alliance NJSBA Educator-in-Residence Vincent DeLucia provided the Task Force with a blueprint for building a community-wide *Safety Alliance*. (The document, “Building a Community Safety Alliance,” is appended to this report and can be accessed at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/safety-alliance.)

The blueprint identifies potential partners, including law enforcement, municipal officials, faith-based organizations, businesses and the medical community. Once formed, the alliance should obtain input from all sectors and identify the safety-related priorities and needs of the community. Based on that information, it should develop a comprehensive action plan. Periodic assessment to determine the initiative’s effectiveness would be critical.

Previous NJSBA reports have detailed the value of such alliances in advancing young people’s mental and emotional well-being and academic achievement.

For example, “[Building a Foundation for Hope](#)” (2019), the report of the NJSBA Task Force on Mental Health Services in the Public Schools, addresses community resource teams, as well as crisis prevention and community partnerships.

“The effort you make to understand the emotional needs of the children in your district can save lives. Communities that come together to solve problems are better able to handle the shattering sense of loss that occurs when a student dies so young. When tragedy strikes, the community will turn to its leaders and demand to know what could have been done to prevent it.”⁵⁶

Developmental Assets NJSBA’s 2017 [Final Report of the Task Force on Student Achievement](#) stresses the value of community partnerships. It cites the work of the Search Institute, an organization dedicated to using social science research “to understand the lives, beliefs and values of young people.” The report also includes a table listing the 40 components of the Search Institute’s [Developmental Assets Framework](#)—“positive supports and strengths that young people need to succeed.”⁵⁷

It also provides an example of two community programs that incorporate the Search Institute’s “Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth”[®] philosophy in which all members of a community contribute to the development of children:

- [The Hopewell Valley Municipal Alliance](#), founded in 1996, serves Hopewell Township, Hopewell Borough and Pennington. It includes mayors, police, first responders, business leaders, clergy, recreation organizations, mental health professionals, providers of senior citizen services, the Hopewell Valley Regional School District board of education and administration, parent-teacher organizations, local libraries, youth-serving organizations, the special needs community, prevention organizations, and interested parents and guardians. It offers peer-to-peer drug and alcohol prevention programs, social-emotional learning programs, teen employment information, and youth leadership opportunities. (www.hvalliance.org)
- The [South Brunswick School District](#) participates in a variety of community-wide partnerships addressing crisis intervention, mental health and family support. Efforts include a Community Resource Team, involving school and municipal officials, the police department, the health department, the township clergy association and other agencies; a Parent Academy; and a special program that helps parents, guardians, teachers and community members raise children to become responsible and capable adults.

The Impact of Gun Violence

Violence that takes place in the community at-large can carry over to the school and have a negative impact on students, academically and emotionally. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, teenagers who experience violence develop several health conditions and risk behaviors, including missing school due to safety concerns and low academic grades.⁵⁸

Pandemic Impact The isolation and stress of the pandemic may have exacerbated the situation.

In its December 2022 report, “Childhood’s Greatest Danger: The Data on Kids and Gun Violence,” *The New York Times* noted, “Last year was a particularly violent one: 3,597 children died by gun fire... The death rate from guns was the highest it has been in more than 20 years.’

Research by the CDC, released on February 13, 2023, shows an increase in suicidal thoughts. “Nearly three out of five high-school girls in the U.S. who were surveyed reported feelings of persistent sadness or hopelessness in 2021, a roughly 60% increase over the past decade,” reports the *Wall Street Journal*.⁵⁹ “Thirty percent reported they seriously considered attempting suicide in 2021, up from 19% in 2011.”

“The data, gathered from a biennial survey from 2011 to 2021 of ninth- to 12th-graders across the country, add to evidence suggesting the stresses, isolation and loss of the Covid-19 pandemic worsened mental-health issues among young people, many of whom were already struggling.”

A Significant Role for Schools

Strategies that encompass mental and emotional health, defuse conflict, help children overcome trauma and build trust between young people and caring adults are instrumental in addressing the prevention and consequences of gun violence. These efforts can be community-wide, school-based, or both.

“District boards of education, through their healthy relationships with school/district administrators and staff, are wonderfully positioned to organize and offer forums to discuss the emotional and safety needs of students, as well as to create opportunities for supporting the well-being of staff and, in turn, to support the well-being of all learners,” wrote George Scott, statewide resource coordinator for the New Jersey Traumatic Loss Coalition, in a paper submitted to the Task Force.

Educators, who interact with children for 180 days a year are primed to make a significant difference in lessening stress and diffusing anger and aggression, according to Scott. (The paper, “Creating Healthy and Supportive School Climates that Support the Well-Being of Students and Mitigate Risk,” is appended to this report and available at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/healthy-school-climate.)

The Need for a Safe Place “Classroom/school campus environments that do not feel physically and emotionally safe for children interfere with learning by sabotaging that part of the child’s brain designated for learning,” wrote Scott.

“Executive functions like memory, problem-solving, attention and emotional self-control go ‘off line’ and are not accessible for the classroom because a sense of risk and pending danger precludes such access. When this happens, learning stops and relationships are jeopardized.”

Scott cited research by [Dr. Sandra Bloom](#), an expert on trauma-related emotional disorders and author of a paper, “[Creating Sanctuary in the School](#).” Her work underscores the importance of creating an environment that provides for safety and the opportunity to heal from the effects of childhood traumas, while helping less-traumatized children as well. He also references books and texts that provide “an understanding of the need for healthy school environments to raise children.”

Scott also noted the following strategies that schools should consider:

- **Parent Academies** that have a “regular focus of providing support in ‘raising healthy children.’”
- **Addressing Developmental Trauma** – Early trauma can disrupt development, interfering with progress in speech-language, motor skills, attention and ability to tolerate change. “Child Study Team members are always encouraged to consider a ‘trauma lens’ during assessment to better create interventions that take into account lived experiences.”
- **Healing from Tragedy**—The positive impact of partnership among parents, schools and community members following a tragedy cannot be minimized. Scott cited organizations created by parents after the 2012 Sandy Hook tragedy—[Safe and Sound Schools](#), [Dylan’s Wings of Change](#) and [Sandy Hook Promise](#)—as sources of information that “can help school boards and their administrations create environments that minimize risk to everyone.”
- **Social-Emotional Learning**—which includes “the learning of skills that promote cooperation, trust, and attachment”—and, sometimes includes the unlearning of certain behavior. [CASEL](#) (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) and the [Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab](#) provide valuable insight.
- **Restorative Justice** is “an alternative to using punishment-based approaches to school discipline and behavior management in K-12 classrooms. It focuses on repairing harm through inclusive processes that bring together students and educators.”
- **Understanding Suicide and Suicidal Thinking**—Hurt can be expressed through acts that are dangerous and, on rare occasion, can lead to student/staff deaths. “It is essential that staff understand suicide. Equally important is understanding that suicidal thinking can migrate to homicidal thinking and behavior.” Scott recommends awareness training for both certified and non-certified staff about suicide and the effectiveness of threat assessments. His paper cites the work of [Dr. Scott Poland](#), an expert on school violence, crisis intervention, suicide and school climate.
- **Healthy Children/Healthy Adults** – “The purpose...of healthy parents and of schools and school districts is to provide adults the opportunities to raise children who are healthy.” Scott referenced the [Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework](#) as a resource for boards of education.

Students: An Essential Voice Family and student involvement is a critical component in developing strategies to address violence and promote wellness at the school and community levels. In a position statement on Safe and Supportive Schools, the National PTA, advises the following:

- Involve students, parents and families in the development, implementation and evaluation of all school safety plans, including emergency preparedness, crisis response, and threat assessment protocols, school discipline policies and procedures, and student health and wellness support services.
- Establish ongoing opportunities for students and parents to provide input on the school environment and climate.⁶⁰

According to the CDC “[d]irectly engaging teens in preventing violence helps them:

- Make healthy choices.
- Be a leader and voice for change for healthier communities and schools.
- Advise community and school decision-makers.
- Promote respect and empathy with family, friends, and peers.⁶¹

A [Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#), developed by six organizations, including the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of School Resource Officers, states that student perception of school climate and safety is an important component of implementing and evaluating security and counseling efforts.⁶²

Severely Affected Communities

“...violence is incredibly concentrated in the U.S. In 2015, more than a quarter of gun homicides happened in about 1,200 neighborhoods that house just 1.5 percent of the U.S. population,” according to an analysis by criminologist David Kennedy of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, cited in an article in *Vox*.⁶³

The impact of gun violence is most severe among young people and persons of color.

The CDC reports⁶⁴ that firearm homicide rates are highest among teens and young adults 15-34 years of age and among Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic or Latino populations. Firearm suicide rates are highest among adults 75 years of age and older and among American Indian or Alaska Native and non-Hispanic white populations.

An analysis of CDC data by the organization Everytown for Gun Safety illustrates the disparate impact on children:

Black children and teens in America are 14 times more likely than their white counterparts to die by gun homicide. Black children and teens are 13 times more likely to be hospitalized for a firearm assault than white children. Latinx children and teens are three times more likely to die by firearm homicide than their white peers.⁶⁵

Researchers agree that collaboration among all sectors of the community is essential to address the safety of children and families in areas experiencing high levels of firearm violence.

Community-Led Strategies Everytown for Gun Safety provides a [summary](#) of community-led strategies⁶⁶ designed to address violence and, in the process, protect young people. The summary includes an evaluation of program effectiveness and examples throughout the nation.

- **Safe Passage**: The percentage of high school students who reported they “did not go to school at least one day in the past month because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school” increased 74% from 2009 to 2019, according to the CDC’s “[1991–2019 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data](#)”

“...city, school, and community leaders can take hyper-local action to make journeys to and from school safer for students of all ages,” states Everytown. Safe passage programs, tailored to popular modes of travel as well as student arrival and dismissal times, have been shown to improve attendance and reduce crime.

“These programs deploy school employees, volunteers, and/or professionals to designated streets, bus stops, and/or on bus lines.... Safe passage programs work best as multi-stakeholder partnerships that allow schools, laws enforcement, and community members to promote safety and lower risks of exposure to gun violence and crime...”⁶⁷

- **Street outreach programs**: Employing a “public health approach” to violence intervention, “street outreach organizations provide both immediate crisis response services and long-term stabilization support to individuals and communities affected by gun violence. They deploy violence interrupters who help prevent shootings by identifying and immediately mediating conflicts in a community and working with individuals most at risk.

“Often these interrupters are former members of street groups who have credibility when speaking to at-risk individuals.”

- **Community-driven crime prevention through environmental design**: This long-term gun violence reduction strategy is “centered on a multi-disciplinary approach of crime prevention that uses urban and architectural design and the management of built and natural environments. By investing in a community’s physical environment and creating spaces in which community members feel safe, cities can discourage and reduce gun violence.”
- **Hospital-based violence intervention programs**: This strategy is “based on the premise that there is a unique window of opportunity to engage victims of violence and prevent retaliation in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic injury. As such, HVIPs are typically located in trauma centers and emergency departments, where service providers partner with patients and families immediately after and during the months that follow the injury to ensure that they have the support and resources necessary to heal and remain safe.”
- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)**: Through this therapeutic approach, “service providers work with individuals and/or groups to change behaviors by shifting current ways of thinking and perceiving situations. CBT is a longstanding, evidence-based strategy for reducing criminal behaviors across multiple populations (e.g., young, old, community-based, and incarcerated) and in a variety of settings (e.g., therapists’ offices, schools, and street corners).” CBT is present in many gun violence intervention programs.”

- Group violence intervention: Also called focused deterrence programs, GVI centers on the idea that “violence can be prevented if individuals believe the costs associated with the violence outweigh any potential benefits. These programs target chronic violent offenders—individuals who have been identified by law enforcement, criminal justice data [or] community members—and include three sets of intervening actors: law enforcement, community representatives, and social service providers.

Employment Opportunities A 2021 [report](#) sponsored by the Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund and the Black Mental Health Alliance stressed the importance of mental health resources and techniques in healing communities that experience gun violence. The researchers also addressed the value of employment opportunities.

Employment opportunities, especially for young adults, can serve as a critical protective factor in disrupting cycles of violence and trauma Summer youth employment programs are associated with substantial reductions in violent crimes and victimizations. A feature of many violence intervention programs is support for job readiness, offering the tools to build more stable lives.⁶⁸

The NJSBA Firearms Safety Task Force urges boards of education serving communities severely affected by gun violence to review information from the resources included in this report and, as appropriate, to initiate, support and/or participate in community-wide programs that address gun violence and advance the health and safety of children.

Findings and Conclusions:

**Community Safety Alliances/Emotional and Mental Health Support/
School Climate:**

Focus on Community

- In 2020-2021, the National Center for Education Statistics recorded 146 school shootings nationwide, 93 of which resulted in death and/or injuries. The numbers represent a 240% increase in total school shootings since 2014-2015 (43) and a 166% increase in shootings that resulted in deaths and/or injuries since 2014-2015 (35).
- According to the National Center for Education Statistics, from 1992 to 2019, less than 3% of youth homicides occurred on school grounds.
- In an average week, students spend approximately 80% of their time *outside* of school, according to a [2020 analysis published by the Federal Reserve](#).
- These statistics illustrate the need for local boards of education to participate in, support and/or initiate community-wide programs to address the impact of gun violence. Such programs encompass students' mental and emotional health, strategies that defuse conflict, help children and adolescents overcome trauma, and enable them to build a bond of trust with caring adults.
- Limiting safety initiatives to the school building does not address the time children are not in the classroom or on campus. Establishing alliances of stakeholders, who genuinely represent the many voices found within the community, will contribute to the safety, security and well-being of our youth.
- Gun violence can affect all communities, regardless of geographic location, population density, or demographic composition. Yet, the incidence of death by firearms among young people and its causes (homicide, suicide, accident) varies by race/ethnicity, age, economic background, and other factors. Therefore, initiatives to combat gun violence and to promote firearm safety should be tailored to individual community challenges, needs and beliefs.

Focus on Schools

- A positive school climate advances student learning and helps build healthy relationships among students and trust between students and adults. Environments that do not feel physically and emotionally safe sabotage the functions essential to learning, according to Task Force member George Scott, statewide resource coordinator for the New Jersey Traumatic Loss Coalition.
- Counseling and mental health support are just as critical to student and staff safety as physical security measures. Such programs can prevent violent incidents by lessening stress among students and diffusing anger and aggression. They can also encourage emotional health among staff and administrators, enabling them to model positive behavior.
- Organizations ranging from the National PTA to the National Association of School Psychologists recommend that students have a voice in safety planning.

- Over 78% of respondents to an NJSBA membership survey issued by the Task Force indicate that their school districts had a structure in place to address trauma or mental health issues. A number of these programs are funded through the state’s School-Based Youth Services program, administered through the state Department of Children and Families. Under a restructuring to begin in 2023-2024, the state will continue funding existing School-Based Youth Services programs, while expanding mental health services to a greater population of students through the establishment of the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services Network. NJSBA supports continued state funding of existing School-Based Youth Services programs, as well as the expanded availability of services through the new Student Support Services Network.

Severely Affected Communities

- Firearm homicide rates are highest among teens and young adults 15-34 years of age and among African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic or Latino populations, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Black children and adolescents are 14 times more likely than their white peers to die by a firearm, according to an analysis of 2016-2020 CDC data by Everytown for Gun Safety. Latin/Hispanic children and adolescents are three times as likely to die by gun fire than white children and teenagers.
- Exposure to gun violence affects children physically, emotionally and socially, according to a 2021 study by Everytown for Gun Safety. It can negatively affect school performance and result in anger and withdrawal.
- Various strategies have had a positive impact in communities severely affected by gun violence. They include safe passage programs to reduce children’s exposure to gun violence when traveling to and from school; violence intervention programs, both hospital-based and “street-based”; cognitive behavioral therapy to change perceptions of situations that would otherwise lead to violence; and expansion of employment/economic opportunities.

Community Safety Alliances/Emotional and Mental Health Support/ School Climate: Recommendations/Suggested Actions:

The Community At-Large

16. Community/Municipal Safety Alliances that include all stakeholders can identify programs to enhance the health and well-being of children and adolescents. For information on alliances, school boards should review information in this report, NJSBA’s [2019 Mental Health Task Force](#) and the [2017 Final Report of the Task Force on Student Achievement](#).
17. School district and community partners should proactively build safe, healthy and nurturing cultures and climates through strategies, such as team building, restorative justice and social-emotional learning/character development.

18. Ensuring that all students have both an adult and a peer in school to whom they can turn in times of stress is a major component of building a safe school climate. School districts and community alliances should consider adopting programs, such as [Dylan's Wings of Change](#), which promotes empathy and youth leadership, or establishing a schoolyard/playground [Buddy Bench](#) effort that ensures a child is never alone.

The Schools

19. School districts should become familiar with services that will be available through the [New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services Network](#).
20. Local school boards should consider establishing Parent/Community Academies that serve the entire community and can provide education on gun safety, while addressing the trauma and emotional challenges that may face children and adolescents, their families and the adults who work with youth.
21. School boards should continue to emphasize social-emotional learning/character development in enabling children to learn in a safe, secure and respectful environment. The Task Force suggests that school leaders review information and resources from [CASEL](#) (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) and the Rutgers [Social-Emotional Learning Character Development Lab](#), directed by Dr. Maurice Elias. (SEL and the work of Dr. Elias have been highlighted in several previous NJSBA research reports, notably "[Building a Foundation for Hope](#)", the [Final Report of the Task Force on Student Achievement](#) and the 2014 report, "[What Makes Schools Safe?](#)").
22. Local school districts should consider awareness training for all staff about indicators of suicide and strategies that effectively interrupt the types of thinking and behavior that could result in tragedy. Several resources are included in the document, "Creating Healthy and Supportive School Climates that Support the Well-being of Students and Mitigate Risk," developed by Task Force member George Scott and attached to this report at www.njsba.org/firearms-safety/healthy-school-climate.
23. School districts should ensure student participation in safety planning and encourage students to take responsibility for their part in maintaining safe school environments.

Severely Affected Communities

24. In communities that experience high levels of gun violence, local boards of education should ensure that they support and, as appropriate, participate in programs that directly and indirectly improve the health and safety of children. These may include violence intervention programs, safe passage initiatives, and efforts to expand employment and economic opportunities. Partners would include municipal governments, law enforcement, the medical community and social service organizations.

Resources and References

- Firearm Safety
- Research Reports and Articles
- Mental Health/Emotional Support/Social-Emotional Learning
- School District/Community Programs

DISCLAIMER: References made in this report do not constitute NJSBA's endorsement of a particular entity, group, or program or any position they may take. The programs and strategies included in this report are offered as options that local boards of education may consider in addressing student safety. Boards of education should investigate any program or strategy in light of the needs of the local school district and, if necessary, consult with the board attorney before deciding to adopt, reject or modify it.

Resources and References

Firearm Safety

Everytown for Gun Safety, an advocacy organization, provides research and information on elements of gun safety, including [safe firearm storage](#), gun storage devices, child and adolescent safety, the impact of gun violence on individuals and communities, and gun violence in urban areas, among other topics. It also serves as an umbrella for several grassroots gun safety groups, including Moms Demand Action, Students Demand Action and Mayors Against Illegal Guns.

Website: www.everytown.org

Be SMART is a campaign initiated by Everytown for Gun Safety to raise awareness of the importance of secure storage in reducing gun violence and unintentional firearm deaths. The acronym stands for **Secure** all guns in your homes and vehicles, **Model** responsible behavior around guns, **Ask** about unsecured guns in other homes, **Recognize** the role of guns in suicide, and **Tell** your peers to be smart. It offers a variety of resources and tools, including brochures, secure storage toolkits and a parents' guide to talking to children about guns.

Website: <https://besmartforkids.org/>

Moms Demand Action advocates public safety measures “that can protect people from gun violence.” It works in communities to encourage a culture of responsible gun ownership. The organization began as a Facebook group the day after the Sandy Hook tragedy and now has chapters in every state. The organization has made presentations to school and parent groups in New Jersey. (The state’s chapter can be contacted on Facebook at [MomsDemandActionNewJersey](#).)


Website: <https://momsdemandaction.org/>

Project ChildSafe, a program of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, promotes firearm safety and education. It offers a variety of materials to educators, parents and guardians, including lesson plans, instructional videos, and a [child’s gun safety pledge](#). ChildSafe also provides safety information to gun owners, and it partners with law enforcement agencies to distribute free safety kits, including gun locks.


Website: <https://projectchildsafe.org/>


Be SMART
Video Message for Parents
<https://bit.ly/3InwVdc>





Project ChildSafe
Talking to Children About Guns
<https://bit.ly/3y3NPsF>





The NRA **Eddie Eagle GunSafe**[®] is a “gun accident prevention program” that helps parents, guardians, law enforcement, community groups and educators teach children about firearm safety. Established over 30 years ago, it offers a variety of instructional materials, videos and other resources. Eddie Eagle will also provide in-school presentations, instructing children on what they should do if they come across an unattended weapon.

Website: <https://eddieeagle.nra.org/>

The **NRA** also offers resources on [gun safety education](#) (in addition to the Eddie Eagle program), [gun safety rules](#), and [firearm training](#) for new or prospective gun owners and hunters.

Brady End Family Fire is an education campaign that addresses firearm injury and death caused by unlocked and unsupervised guns. Its components include **ASK** (Asking Saves Kids), which urges parents and guardians to ask about unsecured firearms in homes their children visit, and **ACT**, which promotes safe firearm storage. Also offered are components on discussing secure firearm storage with friends, family and community members, and a variety of tools and resources on firearm safety practices.

Website: www.bradyunited.org/program/end-family-fire

Northwell Health Center for Gun Violence Prevention conducts research on, and advocates for, firearm safety. In October 2022, it launched a [public information campaign](#) urging parents and guardians to ask questions about gun storage before their children’s playdates or parties. The center offers information and support toward the goal of normalizing such conversations. In addition, it provides resources on helping children cope with gun violence.

Website: www.northwell.edu/center-for-gun-violence-prevention



The graphic is a rectangular box with a blue border. At the top, it reads "Northwell Health" in bold black text, followed by "How to Ask About Guns before a Playdate" in bold black text, and a blue hyperlink "https://bit.ly/3Zf9wkY". Below this is a white square containing a QR code with a small black circle and the letter 'b' in the center. To the right of the QR code is a dark olive green rectangular box with the text "3 TIPS to help parents start the conversation" in white, with "3 TIPS" in orange.

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers medical providers, parents and guardians with educational resources and programs to reduce the incidence of firearm injuries among children and adolescents.

Website: www.aap.org

Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia has participated in studies of gun violence and the psychological/emotional and physical impact on young people. It also offers information to physicians, parents and guardians on gun violence prevention and firearm safety.

Website: www.chop.edu (Enter “Gun Safety” into the search field.)

The [New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers](#), established in 2018, conducts research on firearm causality and violence prevention, translates research into policies and programs, and provides training, education and outreach.

Website: <https://gunviolenceresearchcenter.rutgers.edu/>

[The National PTA](#) has set gun safety and violence prevention as a public policy priority. The organization provides data, “sensible solutions to gun violence,” and advocacy goals to advance the safety of children in their communities.

Website: www.pta.org

[National Center for the Prevention of Community Violence](#) operates a School Safety Center, which provides safety assessments, crisis response planning, and critical incident planning resources. The center is dedicated to interrupting the process of violence before it becomes a tragic event for students, teachers and other school staff.

Website: <https://ncpcv.org/>

Research Reports and Articles

In addition to the resources above, the Task Force has listed a selection of studies, articles and web resources on gun safety, violence prevention and children’s and adolescents’ mental and emotional well-being. Readers may also review the 68 citations in the “Endnotes” section of this report for additional sources of information.

[“New Jersey Gun Laws,”](#) Giffords Center to Prevent Violence. The gun safety advocacy organization provides detailed information on the state’s laws and regulations governing gun ownership, the firearm application process and restrictions. It also offers an assessment of the effectiveness of New Jersey’s firearm laws.

[“2022 Report on Firearms in New Jersey,”](#) New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers. This report analyzes gun access and firearm storage practices among that state’s gun owners.

[“Childhood’s Greatest Danger: The Data on Kids and Violence,”](#) *The New York Times Magazine* (December 14, 2022). This special project clearly illustrates the danger that gun violence poses to America’s youth.

[“Can Community Programs Help Slow the Rise of Violence?,”](#) *ProPublica*, (January 30, 2023). This article addresses the effectiveness of current violence intervention strategies, many of which have their roots in the 1990s, and references the impact of social media and the fracturing of gang loyalties on these programs. [Also published as “When Law Enforcement Alone Can’t Stop the Violence,” *New Yorker* (February 6, 2023).]

[“The Science of Gun Policy: A Critical Synthesis of Research Evidence on the Effects of Gun Policies in the United States,”](#) RAND Corporation (January 2023). This report measures the impact of state firearm regulations and safety practices on homicide, suicide and injury.

[“Gun Safety Should Be a Key Part of Safety Guidance to Parents,”](#) Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (March 16, 2016), The co-director of CHOP’s Violence Prevention Institute emphasizes the importance of physicians discussing gun safety with parents and provides an approach that they can use when addressing this sensitive subject.

[“Children and Gun Safety: What to Know and Do,”](#) Harvard Medical School (July 19, 2019). “Gun ownership is a polarizing issue here in the US. But whatever anyone thinks about gun ownership, all can agree that we need to work to keep people safe — particularly our children. Here are three things all parents can do.”

[“Stop the Shooting: Inside the effort to protect students form neighborhood gun violence,”](#) *Chalkbeat* (September 13, 2022). This article describes violence prevention programs in Newark and explains why protecting students from firearm danger must focus in the neighborhoods and communities where children spend most of their time.

[“Violence Impacts Teen Lives,”](#) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (February 2021). This fact sheet provides statistics that illustrate the impact of violence on adolescents’ education and their physical and emotional health.

[“Invisible Wounds: Gun Violence and Community Trauma among Black Americans,”](#) Everytown Research and Policy and the Black Mental Health Alliance (May 2021, updated January 2022). “Community trauma” plagues the lives of children and adults living in areas subject to high levels of gun violence. This report offers solutions, including mental health support, violence intervention, positive community-police relationships and greater economic opportunities.

Mental Health/Emotional Support/Social-Emotional Learning

[“Creating Healthy and Supportive School Climates that Support the Well-Being of Students and Mitigate Risk.”](#) Appendix D of this report offers 24 sources of information on safe and healthy school climates, traumatic loss, restorative justice and other subjects.

[Rutgers Social-Emotional Character Development Lab,](#) cited in this report, guides school-based efforts on prevention, social-emotional learning, social decision-making and social problem-solving, violence prevention, and character development.

Website: www.secdlab.org

The [Search Institute,](#) cited in this report, is dedicated to using social science research “to understand the lives, beliefs and values of young people.” Search’s [Developmental Relationships Framework](#) enables young people to “to be resilient in the face of challenges and to grow up thriving.”

Website: <https://searchinstitute.org/>

“Building a Foundation for Hope” The 2019 final report of NJSBA’s Task Force on Mental Health Services in the Public Schools offers guidance and resources to help school districts advance the emotional well-being of students.

Website: www.njsba.org/building-a-foundation-for-hope

Dylan’s Wings of Change Formed after the 2012 Sandy Hook tragedy, this organization offers the Wingman program, a youth-led social and emotional learning program that promotes empathy and youth leadership, and “experience workshops” for children and adults, along with other programs.

Website: www.dylanswingsofchange.org



In response to NJSBA’s membership survey, issued in January 2023, over three-quarters of respondents indicated that their school districts had structures in place to address trauma and mental health issues. Respondents cited a number of arrangements with private and non-profit service providers, as well as community-based organizations. The list below includes many of the organizations and providers cited in the survey. (Please note that the list is provided for the information of readers and does not constitute an endorsement by NJSBA of any organization or provider.)

Cape Assist is dedicated to preventing and treating substance misuse and related issues in Cape May County through education, advocacy, counseling and community collaboration. It offers a wide range of services and training for youth, families, schools, community organizations, and local government and state agencies. Website: www.capeassist.org/

Care Solace is a mental health coordination service with more than 600 school district clients nationwide, including some in New Jersey. It supports the delivery of mental health services for all members of the school community. Website: <https://www.caresolace.org/>

Care Plus New Jersey, established in 1978, offers school-based services including counseling, care coordination, school clearance assessments, and access to a full continuum of integrated care and social support services. Website: <https://careplusnj.org/>

Effective School Solutions works with school districts to implement mental health and behavioral support programs that address trauma and maintain students in the home district. Website: <https://effectiveschoolsolutions.com/>

First Children Services offers counseling and mental health and behavioral support services to approximately 80 school districts in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Website: www.firstchildrenservices.com

SAGE Alliance, founded in 1997, provides therapeutic education support to elementary, middle and high school students challenged by anxiety, depression, ADHD and or other emotional issues, such as school refusal. Website: <https://sagealliance.com/>

[The THRIVE Institute](https://thethrivenetwork.com/services/thrive-institute/), part of the THRIVE Network, works with schools and organizations to meet the mental health needs of children. The organization offers virtual and in-person training on how trauma impacts children and what schools can do to help them.

Website: <https://thethrivenetwork.com/services/thrive-institute/>

[Wellsprings Counseling Center](http://www.wellsprings.org) provides professional counseling to children and adults through individual family and group therapy. Website: www.wellsprings.org

School District/Community Programs

The following local school district programs are among those identified in the January 2023 NJSBA membership survey or through research for this project:

West Windsor-Plainsboro Parent University

Operated under the aegis of the district's guidance program, the Parent University recently held a session focusing on [Safety and Security](#), including a presentation on firearm safety.

The Safe Passage Program, Newark

An initiative of the [Newark Public Safety Collaborative](#), the program deploys outreach workers to areas around four schools in the South and West Wards to help ensure students get to and from school safely.

The Source at Red Bank Regional High School

Established 21 years ago and funded through the state's School-Based Youth Services Program, the Source provides comprehensive counseling services, prevention programming, advocacy, academic support, employment services, family engagement, basic need fulfillment, education forums, and collaboration with community partners. All Source programs are free.

Hopewell Valley Municipal Alliance

A collaborative effort of the Hopewell Valley Regional School District, the leadership of three municipalities and a wide range of community organizations, the alliance offers peer-to-peer drug and alcohol prevention programs, social-emotional learning programs, teen employment information and youth leadership opportunities.

Falcon's Lounge at Manchester Regional High School

A collaborative project of the Manchester Regional Board of Education and Care Plus NJ, Inc., Falcon's Lounge provides comprehensive support for the high school's students, their families and the larger school community. Services include recreational, therapeutic and educational opportunities focused on the enhancement of students' social, emotional and physical well-being. The program is funded through the state's School-Based Youth Services program.

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