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NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

STATEMENT
OF BILL SMITH

ON BEHALF OF
THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON

SCHOOL SAFETY

MAY 18, 1999

Chairman Castle and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the subcommittee about a subject that has become all too familiar in the past two years—school safety. My name is Bill Smith and I have been a teacher for 23 years, 22 of which have been spent at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon.

Thurston is a typical suburban high school with 1500 students in four grades. Thurston students and teachers have always had a lot of pride in our school. Until recently, we felt safe at Thurston, never believing that the sort of tragedies we witnessed at other schools around the nation could happen at our school.

Unfortunately, in the past year I have become all too aware of the devastating impact of school violence on teachers, students, and communities. On May 21, 1998, Kip Kinkel, a 15-year-old Thurston High School student, opened fire in our school cafeteria, killing two students and wounding 22 others. Three hundred students were in the cafeteria at the time of the shooting, including my own son who watched as his best friend was shot four times.

Since that time, the atmosphere at Thurston has changed dramatically. Students and faculty have become much more aware of the potential for violence. Every day, as I walk through the school cafeteria, I think about last year's tragedy and worry about the potential for more violence in our school. The aftermath of the tragedy permeates every aspect of school life, making teachers' jobs more difficult as we try to deal with the impact of violence on our students.

As a teacher, a parent, and a member of the community, I have struggled over the past year to understand the tragic events that took place in my school and to look for ways to ensure future school safety.

I believe that the incident at Thurston High, like the tragedies at Columbine High School and elsewhere, demonstrates the need for a comprehensive approach to school safety. There is no simple, magic solution to the problem. Rather, school violence prevention requires a

combination of youth crime prevention programs, restriction of access to guns and other weapons, and increased school security. Federal, state, and local governments, school administrators, faculty, students, and parents all play a role in preventing violence.

Since our own experience with school violence, Thurston High has implemented a number of programs to ensure school safety. We have hired an additional school counselor to both help our students deal with the trauma of last year's violence and to work with students on violence prevention.

In addition, a member of the Springfield Police Department is now permanently stationed at Thurston High School as a School Resources Officer. Although he is armed, the Resource Officer's primary focus is not on patrolling the school, but rather on regular communication with students to recognize potential trouble areas and find solutions. We have found the School Resources Officer to be an extremely valuable addition to our school. He has developed a trusting relationship with the students, enabling him to keep on top of what is happening on a daily basis.

I believe the presence of such Resource Officers or similar violence prevention programs in schools across the country could have a significant impact on reducing the prevalence of violence. Thurston High School had no prior history of violence. Our students and faculty were unprepared to recognize early warning signs of potential violence. We, like many schools around the country, believed we were immune from such violence. Schools can no longer afford this sort of naivete.

Kip Kinkel had a history of trouble and an expressed fascination with violence. He had given a talk in speech class about how to build a bomb, had bragged about torturing animals, and had been in trouble for throwing rocks off a highway overpass. He had apparently even given a hint of his violent plans to some students. Yet, we were unable to recognize the potential for violence and take steps to prevent it.

All schools need prevention programs that enable school faculty to identify potentially troubled students and offer counseling or other resources to the students and their families. Teachers, administrators, and support personnel need training to recognize the early warning signs of potential violence. Schools need enhanced counseling and mental health services to help troubled students throughout their school years. Programs such as these could have helped us recognize Kip Kinkel as potentially violent and could have provided him and his family with preventative services.

Any efforts to ensure school safety, however, will be inadequate without measures to block youth access to firearms and other weapons. Kip Kinkel entered our school with a semi-automatic rifle, a 9-millimeter pistol, and a 50-round ammunition clip. No child should have access to such weapons. As a parent and as a teacher, I strongly support efforts to prohibit the transfer of guns to children. We must also hold adults responsible if children gain access to loaded weapons or use an adult's weapon to commit a crime. In addition, we must take an aggressive approach with persons who bring weapons onto school property. Kip Kinkel was expelled from school for gun possession the day before the shooting. Yet, he was back at school the following day to commit a horrible crime. No school safety program can be successful without common sense gun control measures.

Thurston High School students and faculty struggle every day to deal with the aftermath of violence. We now understand that we cannot take for granted the safety of our school. We have learned that we need an aggressive, comprehensive approach to ensuring school safety. This week, as we mark the one-year anniversary of the shootings at Thurston High School, we hope that other schools, Congress, and the nation, can learn from our experience and take steps to prevent future tragedies.

In particular, Congress must provide funding for:

- Training of teachers, administrators, and all education support personnel to recognize the early warning signs of potential violence;
- Development of comprehensive, community-based school safety programs and enhanced security throughout schools;

- Creation of anonymous tiplines so that students will feel free to alert adults to potential problems;
- Increases in the number of school counselors; and
- Increases in children's access to mental health services.

In addition, Congress must enact federal laws to:

- Bar the transfer to and possession by juveniles of semi-automatic assault weapons and high capacity ammunition clips;
- Increase penalties for selling or transferring handguns, assault weapons, and high capacity ammunition clips to juveniles;
- Hold gun owners responsible if children gain access to loaded firearms or use an adult's weapon in the commission of a crime; and
- Impose mandatory background checks and waiting periods on individuals purchasing any firearms.

It is disappointing that last week the Senate failed to take actions such as these to address youth crime prevention or gun control as part of the Juvenile Justice bill.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and hope we can work together as a nation to prevent further violence in our schools.