

Dear [Lawmaker's name],

I am writing to you to propose an amendment to the state law that aims to better support the mental and emotional health of kids as they participate in mandated active shooter drills at school (Chapter 41 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes. N.J.S.A. 18A:41-1).

Research shows that these drills are traumatic for children, simulating violence without context for children as young as preschool. On top of the emotional damage, active shooter drills have not demonstrated any safety benefits despite their ubiquity in the state.

As your constituent, I am urging you to prioritize changing current requirements for active shooter drills in New Jersey, specifically, the amendment as written:

- Does not align with research or best practice recommendations from Everytown for Gun Safety, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA), which all advocate for staff (not student) training.
- Does not respond to current research showing that many children experience trauma from the drills.
- Does not respond to recommendations from the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), which emphasize the importance of parental consent.
- Creates a burdensome mandate that forces all children to participate fully in drills, regardless of their impact on an individual child's mental and emotional health.

Active shooter drills should not be done with students at all as they are not shown to be effective and they can train future school shooters. If these drills continue, it must be done in a way that prioritizes the wellbeing of the students, specifically with the following recommendations from AFT's 2020 resolution on active shooter drills:

- Drills should not include simulations that mimic an actual incident
- Parents should have advance notice of drills
- Drills should be announced to students and educators prior to the start
- Schools should create age and developmentally-appropriate drill content with the involvement of school personnel, including school-based mental health professionals
- Schools should couple drills with trauma-informed approaches to address students' and educators' well-being
- Track information about the efficacy and effects of drills

In light of covid increasing rates of youth suicide we plead for changes to school active shooter drills that do not further traumatize children. Students should be prepared in ways that are safest and age-appropriate.

Facts

- Following school shooter drills there is a sharp increase in stress, anxiety (42% increase), depression (39% increase), and fears about death (22% increase) among high schoolers ([Huskey & Connelly, 2021](#)).
- Students who participate in active shooter drills at school have trauma symptoms as far as 90 days afterwards ([Huskey & Connelly, 2021](#)).
- Other research found students felt significantly less safe at school or in various parts of the building after school shooting drills ([Schildkraut, et al, 2019](#)).
- In the 90 days following a drill, concerns over health increased by 23 percent and concerns over death increased by 22 percent in students ([Everytown Research & Policy, 2023](#)).
- In Parkland, for example, the site of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, had an active-shooter drill just the month before the shooting. The suspect had been through such drills, and may have used them to his advantage ([Mazzei, 2018](#)).

Hello, esteemed members of the Maplewood Township Committee,
Thank you again for meeting with members of our committee on School Security Drills in November of last year. Though I was personally unable to attend that meeting, Jen Serravallo and Natalie Peretti who presented reported back on your enthusiastic support of our efforts. Since then, as you know, a revised policy 8420 has passed in SOMSD and although it didn't accomplish all we had hoped for, it made some important progress on this issue. We have since met with many other stakeholders and Sheena Collum as well as the SO township committee and members of the SOPD. We have recently learned about a new bill which would have some serious negative consequences on the mental health of children in schools during drills if it passes as written. Sheena has offered her support of our positions and we have written a proclamation that SOMA Action is also endorsing. We were hoping we could count on your to cosign with her or write your own. Thank you for considering this important public support.

Best regards,

Blue Chevigny and the other members of the SOMA Justice School Security Committee

We, the undersigned, endorse the below recommendations to improve Assemblywoman Mila Jasey's proposed amendment (A5828)/S4323) to current state law on school security drills.

Members of the SOMA Justice School Safety and Security Committee and the South Orange and Maplewood communities at large with expertise in education,

mental health, law, and other areas have been pushing for change on school security drills over the past year, resulting in a local school board policy change in our district. While the South Orange Maplewood School District's revised policy 8420 for Emergency and Crisis Situations did not incorporate all suggestions, what the Board of Education did approve has already been lauded by school leadership and first responders as being more efficient and less traumatic for children.

Overall, we support the goal of Assemblywoman Jasey's amendment to make sure that children with special needs are explicitly planned for and cared for in emergencies. We support the ideas of written plans and for staff to practice procedures to ensure all children are kept safe. We also support the idea that emergency planning should be part of IEP and 504 plans for students with special needs.

Unfortunately, the amendment as written:

1. Does not align to research or best practice recommendations from Everytown for Gun Safety, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA), which all advocate for staff (not student) training.
2. Does not respond to current research showing that many children experience trauma from the drills.
3. Does not respond to recommendations from the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), which emphasize the importance of parental consent.
4. Creates a burdensome mandate that forces all children to participate fully in drills, regardless of their impact on an individual child's mental and emotional health.

We are asking specifically for:

- The removal of all language that mandates all students to fully participate in drills.
- Any requirements for students' participation to be contingent upon parental consent and advanced notice.
- Tabletop exercises to be used in lieu of reenactments whenever students do participate.

Given that New Jersey does more fire and security drills than any other state in the nation and evidence shows that these drills are both disruptive to classroom instruction and upsetting to children, we would also like

Assemblywoman Jasey to consider adding the following improvements to the bill:

- Reducing the number of security drills to three per year, rather than one per month, with prioritization given to staff training and involving students only after parents give consent.
- Reducing the number of fire drills to three per year, rather than one per month.

We can all agree that we want all children to be safe--both physically and emotionally--at school and in our communities. Again, the intent of Assemblywoman Jasey and her co-sponsors with this bill is absolutely something we agree with, but with the way it reads now, there are a number of unintended negative consequences on the very children we are trying hardest to protect. We have seen the trauma and distress that these drills can cause and must do what we can to minimize that in the future.

Signed,

SOMA Justice

SOMA Action

References

The National Association of School Psychologists and National Association of School Resource Officers collaborated on the following best practices brief. The Sandy Hook Initiative contributed, and it is endorsed as well by the National Associations of Elementary and Secondary Principals, the National Association of School Counselors, the National PTA, and the School Social Work Association of America. Note that on pages 1, 7, 8, and 21 in the brief they explicitly say that schools should obtain parental consent before conducting any drills with children.

This is because drills are proven to harm students, and it is opening up districts to liability to force students to be involved without parental consent.

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/systems-level-prevention/best-practice-considerations-for-schools-in-active-shooter-and-other-armed-assailant-drills>

Here is the Everytown for Gun Safety in cooperation with NEA and AFT brief and best practice recommendations. Note that in the section on drills they say, "However, given the concerns raised by parents, students, and medical professionals about the impact that lockdown and active shooter drills can have on student development, including the risk for depression and anxiety and the risk for lasting symptoms, our organizations refrain from endorsing training for students..." This is a well-researched brief, and you can follow the footnotes in addition to reading their summaries and recommendations.

<https://everytownresearch.org/reports/keeping-schools-safe-plan-stop-mass-shootings-end-gun-violence-american-schools/>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has published a resource titled "Creating School Active Shooter/Intruder Drills", which "provides information to schools about how to create a trauma-informed active shooter/intruder drill." Page 2 of this resource supports our recommendation of parent notification in advance of school security drills. It advises that parents should be informed of their school's drill schedule at the beginning of the school year. This notification should include information regarding "the types of drills that will take place (e.g., fire, wind, active shooter, tornado) and the type of exercise (walkthrough, tabletop exercise, full-scale drill)."

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/creating-school-active-shooter-intruder-drills>

Dr. Sara Wakefield, a member of our group and researcher at Rutgers University, compiled a [research brief](#) for the South Orange-Maplewood School District Board of Education. She did a comprehensive literature review and found that drills are shown to cause harm, do not make kids feel safer, and do not improve outcomes in emergencies.

Last year, our working group produced recommendations for revising school district policy 8420 for Emergency and Crisis Situations. A version of the policy containing many of our recommendations was approved by the South Orange-Maplewood

School District Board of Education last November. Considerations for students with special needs was absolutely at the forefront of what we were aiming to accomplish, and we were careful to include special considerations for students with mental, emotional, and psychological needs. Prioritized training for teachers, tabletop exercises for students, and—absolutely—careful planning and considerations for students with special needs with and without IEPs and 504s is spelled out, as is consideration of the developmental level of the students attending the school (i.e., what happens at Montrose Early Childhood Center which serves preschool students should not be the same as what happens at Columbia High School). We circulated a [petition](#) in our community as we were trying to get this passed, and quickly acquired almost 600 signatures. It had broad support in discussions on Facebook, and nobody spoke out against it at any of the open BOE meetings.

One idea we strongly believe adheres to the state security drill law as written, protects children from unnecessary trauma, and allows all children with physical disabilities to participate as well, is to use tabletop exercises with students and to only have teachers participate in active/physical drills. The use of tabletop exercises received strong support from the Maplewood Chief of Police and Deputy Chief, as well as Mayor (at the time) Vic De Luca and Deputy Mayor (now Mayor) Frank McGehee as well as Dean Dafis (now Deputy Mayor). We also met with the PTA President's Council in SOMSD (a group of PTA leadership from all district schools), and our recommendations had strong support from them as well.

We have more resources and research as well as popular media coverage and opinion pieces that have been published, which are aligned with our recommendations. Please let us know if you would like us to send you any of this additional information.