

## David Trahan: How to make schools safer for all Mainers

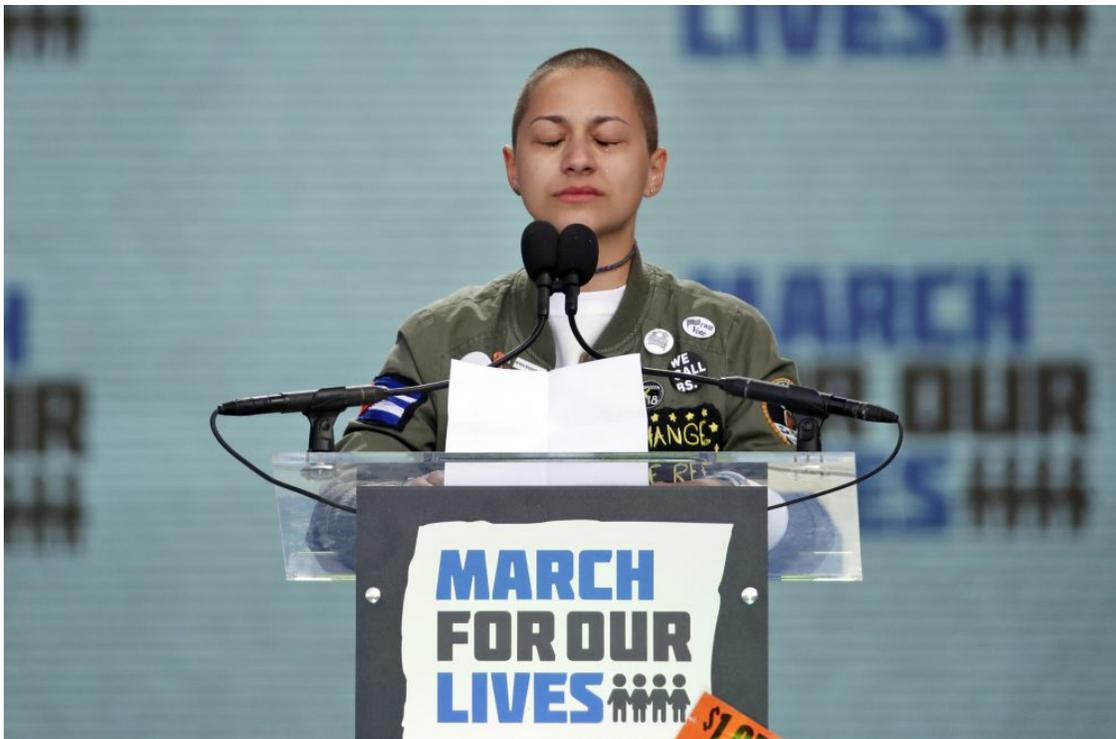
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By David Trahan

February 11, 2019

I remember standing under the bright blue Maine sky, next to my truck, listening to the radio when, like a bucket of ice water, starting from the top of my head and traveling down to the bottom of my feet, the words came, "A plane has struck the World Trade Center and it is on fire." Reports came a little while later: "Another plane has crashed into the second tower."

I knew at that moment our world had changed forever — we were under a massive terrorist attack. Like a lightning bolt shattering a giant oak, our sense of security was gone forever.



FILE - In this March 24, 2018 file photo, Emma Gonzalez, a survivor of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., closes her eyes and cries as she stands silently at the podium for the amount of time it took the Parkland shooter to go on his killing spree during the "March for Our Lives" rally in support of gun control in Washington. Last year's shooting at a Florida high school sparked a movement among a younger generation angered by gun violence and set the stage for a significant shift in America's gun politics. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

In the wake of this massive tragedy came unprecedented and controversial security reforms, including the Patriot Act, and sweeping airport security upgrades, such as body scans, armed pilots and reinforced, locked cockpit doors — precautionary security upgrades that have so far stopped any new terrorist attack using a U.S. commercial airliner.

Like 9/11, high-profile school shootings have rocked our nation to the core and are leading to calls for reform. Unfortunately, gun control advocates and their supporters are consuming the debate by blaming this relatively new form of violence on the prevalence of firearms. I would argue all day that these incidences are individual acts of domestic terrorism perpetrated on soft targets — schools — meant to provide the greatest level of shock and awe possible.

Unfortunately, unlike 9/11, policy makers and Americans have not focused on coming together to institute universal security changes at all schools capable of stopping or minimizing the success of future attacks.

After the tragic Sandy Hook school shooting on Dec. 14, 2012, on behalf of my organization, I introduced legislation L.D. 529, titled “Resolve, Directing the Department of Education to Examine School Security.” A second bill, L.D. 905, was introduced much later, but with almost the exact same title. As a result of those two bills, experts from the Georgia nonprofit Safe Havens were employed to evaluate school security in Maine. In January 2014, the Maine Department of Education released a partial report on the findings of that study. The study revealed serious security problems with public schools across the state and made many security improvement recommendations.

The report methodically laid out three priority levels as money became available. The highest priority to Maine lawmakers was “to create the Maine School Safety Center.” The center would act as a clearinghouse for leaders of Maine’s public safety community and the Department of Education, school administrators, etc., to recommend proper training and facility upgrades, and to share information.

Unfortunately, no action has been taken to create the School Safety Center, and because most of the report was made confidential in an effort to protect vulnerable schools, we have no way of knowing whether our schools are safer today than they were in 2012.

As a result, Rep. Patrick Corey, R-Windham, has introduced legislation this session to create the new Department of Education School Safety Center.

There is a way forward to make our schools safer, not just related to firearms but for all potentially dangerous situations.

As a legislator, I spent seven years creating the Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability for just this kind of work. OPEGA is the Legislature's independent watchdog with broad power to investigate anything under the purview of state government. They should be directed by the Government Oversight Committee to examine statewide whether we have adequate school security. In addition, they should look at whether it is equitable across urban, suburban and rural school districts.

They could also look at what federal, state and local resources are available to invest in security upgrades, the prevalence of effectiveness of school resource officers or whether more money is needed. From that study could come broader reforms and safety improvements, similar to those undertaken after 9/11.

### **School Resource Officers**

If I had to describe a school resource officer, I would call them a hybrid guidance counselor on steroids. They are peace officers, and they are the canaries in the coal mine looking for the signs of substance abuse and bullying. They generally act as the last line of defense for the all the ills facing young people.

Against this back drop, I know of no minimum standards, required training, ongoing training or state-structured rules governing resource officers. Those decisions are made locally. In Maine, we celebrate local control; unfortunately, on the flip side, if there was ever a worst-case scenario in Maine, every one of us would want our resource officers to have every tool and training necessary to end a crisis.

Many schools in populated, wealthier urban areas have resource officers. But what about rural Maine schools and the people working in them? Don't they deserve safe and secure schools?

Maine School Management Association, the Department of Education, lawmakers and Mainers should all rally behind making our schools a safe place to learn. Such an effort begins with good information, and we don't have it at this time. We have compassion, desire and a shared will, what we need is a thoughtful plan moving forward and strong leadership to make it a priority.

We know that the worst evil our society can produce is targeting kids in our nation's schools, like the policy makers that followed 9/11, our generation is tasked with making sure our schools are as safe as our airports. The way to do that right now, is to make sure a bad guy never makes it through our first line of defense.

*David Trahan of Waldoboro, a former state legislator, is executive director of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine. This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of that organization.*

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