

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

March 16, 2018

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

I write to continue our discussion regarding the Federal Commission on School Safety, for which President Donald J. Trump has named you as chair. I appreciated you taking the time to meet with me to discuss this Commission, but I was troubled and disappointed by your lack of specificity and detail on a wide variety of key issues. I am concerned that President Trump's Commission, which you have been asked to lead, will be another attempt by the White House to distract from and delay meaningful gun safety action. So I look forward to receiving substantive answers and real information about the Commission's planned work that goes beyond the conversation we had earlier this week. Given the seriousness of this problem, I am hopeful that you can lead the Commission in a direction that takes strong steps to address this dire issue, and to that end I have also included some suggestions on actions the Commission should consider taking.

Gun violence continues to claim the lives of tens of thousands Americans each year, in every state, and from all walks of life. The issue of mass murder in our schools has risen again to the forefront of our public discourse with the heinous attack in Parkland, Florida, that took the lives of 17 young people.

This week, thousands of children and teens across the country, including in my home state of Washington, walked out of school to make their voices heard on an issue they are passionate about. Their message was very clear: The time for inaction is over. I could not be more proud of the strength and willingness of these students to engage in our civic process to push for change. I hope that you share that pride in their efforts and that the Commission will stand with them, not be a force opposed to or distracting from their work.

First, I am concerned that President Trump plans to use this Commission to shift the conversation away from meaningful gun safety reforms, which the vast majority of people across the country support. Making our schools safer is an important goal—as a former preschool teacher, a mother, a grandmother, and a member of my community, nothing is more important to me than doing everything possible to keep our kids safe. When I left our meeting, I was not confident that you shared these goals, particularly when it comes to gun safety. Instead, I fear that you plan to use this Commission to focus on everything but gun safety reforms.

Second, I have deep concerns over the composition, timing, and substantive scope of the Commission given the lack of information provided to the public and to me in our meeting. As I expressed to you, I believe that this Commission must begin its work immediately, it must hold meetings across the country that are open to the public, it must gather input from the broadest range of individuals, and it must have a firm deadline to complete its work. I was very disappointed that you could not give me a timeline for when the Commission would offer recommendations or offer me any assurances that the Commission would not be delayed for the sake of delay. I am also troubled that plans for the Commission's composition at the outset only included members of the Trump Cabinet or their designees, and I urge you to press the White House to include members from outside the Administration who have expertise in relevant subject areas.

Third, while I was encouraged that you claimed that you had no interest in meeting with the National Rifle Association (NRA) yourself, I am concerned that you could not assure me that it would not influence or have veto power over the recommendations of the Commission. Given the recent actions of President Trump, who publicly stated his support for increasing the age to buy assault weapons and implementing universal background checks, only to renege on those positions after meeting with the NRA, Americans have every reason to be concerned about the undue influence of the gun lobby in this process.

I hope the Commission takes the challenge of gun violence seriously and addresses these concerns. To that end, I believe meaningful solutions could include implementing universal background checks, banning high-capacity magazines and bump stocks, raising the age requirements to purchase firearms, and funding research into gun violence, among other promising strategies to save lives.

It is important that Members of Congress and the public are provided with information about the entity that is charged with addressing one of the most serious and pressing issues in our country, and I will work to hold the Administration accountable to ensure this Commission engages in meaningful action. To that end, please answer the following questions about the Commission's work by no later than March 23, 2018:

1. Who is responsible for selecting the members of the Commission?
2. When will the membership of the Commission be finalized and announced to the public?
3. Please state how the Commission will include, either as full members or through other means:
 - a. Medical professionals;
 - b. Public health professionals;
 - c. Law enforcement;
 - d. Gun safety experts;
 - e. Educators;
 - f. School leadership;
 - g. Members of the public; or
 - h. State and local officials.
4. How will the Commission incorporate the input and expertise of stakeholders not represented by its membership?
5. Will the Commission have staff to assist in its work?

6. What is the scope of the Commission's work?
 - a. How was that scope determined?
 - b. Which, if any, stakeholders were consulted in the development of the Commission's scope?
7. Will the Commission hold public meetings? If so, how many? How will stakeholders be able to engage in the public meetings?
8. How long will the Commission operate?
9. Will there be a set end-date for completion of the Commission's work?
10. Will there be a written report produced at the conclusion of the Commission's work?
 - a. Will this report contain concrete recommendations for action to be taken by Congress or the Administration?
 - b. Will stakeholders not represented in the Commission's membership have the opportunity to comment on the Commission's recommendations before they are finalized?
11. Will any individual, either within or outside the Administration, have veto power over whether the Commission includes or excludes a given recommendation?
12. Will the NRA be consulted by the Commission, either formally or informally?
13. Will the NRA have the power to alter or veto any recommendations?
14. Will the Commission consider recommendations of gun safety proposals irrespective of the Administration's political position on those proposals?
15. Will the Commission analyze the efficacy of past federal actions, such as the assault weapons ban, to determine their effectiveness in addressing the current situation?
16. Will the Commission look into the impact of universal background checks, including the closing of existing loopholes and fully funding background check infrastructure?
17. Will the Commission examine current efforts at the state level to address gun safety, including restricting firearm possession from domestic abusers, increasing the age to purchase a gun, and the requirement for training and issuance of a permit before sale?
18. Will the Commission review current federal efforts, or lack thereof, to study gun violence as the public health crisis it is, particularly with respect to research that could be performed by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention?

It is my sincere hope that this Commission will be more than mere window dressing, a delaying tactic, or a platform for ineffective, NRA-approved proposals that place the interests of the gun lobby above the protection of our families. Rather, it must be a meaningful effort to take effective and overwhelmingly-supported steps to reduce gun violence. And it is my sincere hope that Congress and the Administration can work together to implement strong measures that will save lives and make communities across our country safer to live. As has been made clear this week, our children are watching, and they have already waited far too long.

Sincerely,


PATTY MURRAY
United States Senator