

Date: December 4, 2023
To: From: Sherri Simmons

RE: LEGISLATIVE STUDY COMMISSION TO EVALUATE AND PROVIDE
RECOMMENDATIONS ON MANDATED SAFETY PROTOCOLS FOR RHODE ISLAND
SCHOOLS

My name is Sherri Simmons. I live in Pawtucket and I am a former Elementary School Teacher who has participated in many Active Shooter Drills. I'm testifying today because my experience with active shooter drills has led me to question the efficacy of such drills and caused me to witness, as well as experience, the effect said drills can have on participants. I hope my testimony will help inform your study.

First and foremost, I would like to say that the most potent solution for keeping RI children and school personnel from being murdered in school and at work, is to pass as many common sense gun safety laws in RI that we can as this is the most effective way to ensure the safety of all of our children and school community members. The questions that you posed to determine *if* RI General Law 16-21-4 should be changed might become moot if comprehensive commonsense gun laws were passed in this state. For the legislators on this commission, each of you can use your power as legislators to make this happen and I heartily encourage you to do so.

Until then, I respectfully submit the following:

Effects of Active Shooter Drills My fifth-grade students and I were negatively affected by active shooter drills/simulations because we knew the unspoken truth: That in a real shooter event, no matter how quiet we were, the shooter knew exactly where we were and could very easily get to us.

My students and I participated in two types of shooter drills. In the first type we practiced locking down and the second type we locked down with police officers running through the halls rattling doors and yelling. Although both drills were upsetting, I can attest that the second type of drill was very traumatic for my students and myself. Participating in a simulated shooter drill makes children and adults **experience the feeling of being hunted. That is terrifying and this is how these drills differ from fire drills or evacuation drills.** As an adult participant, I could reassure myself that my experience was only a drill. Children, however, can vary in their ability to do that. Furthermore, for children or others who have experienced gun violence, or domestic violence, or have special needs, or are exposed to news about the all too frequent school shootings in this country, the ability to distinguish the difference between a drill and a real emergency *in the moment* can be very difficult and may result in trauma. **It is my personal experience and belief that nobody, especially children, needs to practice a simulated active shooting event. There is no point because in a real shooting event, if lockdown is the only plan, there is absolutely nothing you can do but wait for your turn. The only thing you practice in a simulation drill is terror.** I would urge this Commission to recommend doing away with any type of simulation drill.

Developmentally Appropriate Lockdowns As a teacher of young children, I struggled to find the appropriate language needed to prepare my students for active shooter drills and would have welcomed input from mental health professionals. Also, in spite of my district's mandate to hold unannounced drills, I always informed my students prior to participating in a drill. I knew that my students didn't need to be *scared in order* to listen my instructions. Indeed, honesty was necessary to develop trust so my students *would* follow my instructions in an actual emergency. Therefore, I submit that all active shooter policies, drills, evacuations *must* be designed with input from school personnel (including any and all teachers who wish to participate) as well as with mental health professionals and law enforcement and should be developmentally appropriate.

Evacuation Plan In my district, lockdown drills only began after the shooting at Sandy Hook. After my first shooter lockdown drill, I had many, many questions that my district could not answer. Most of my questions had to do with structural safety. There were so many structural issues that made our school building an extremely soft target yet, year after year, there was never enough money in the budget to fix even simple things that could have made our school building safer. Because of this, I knew that my students and I would be best served if, in an actual shooting event, we merely climbed out the classroom windows and ran for our lives. That *was my plan* for my students should a shooter enter our building. After reading in detail about the shootings at Sandy Hook, Uvalde and subsequent shootings, I am convinced more than ever that evacuation options should be a part of every active shooter plan. School personnel need instruction on when and how to best execute this option.

Fire Drills It was my experience that fire drills are very disruptive and not necessary to repeat on a monthly basis. Students as young as kindergarten age are capable of lining up quickly and walking outside after one or two practice drills. In fact, all you need to do is ask how many times children are directed to line up quietly every day in Elementary school and they'd be happy to tell you, complete with heavy sighs and eye rolling.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my testimony. I am hopeful that this commission's findings will compel the legislature to move forward with commonsense informed actions that will keep RI's children and school personnel safer **until the actual problem is solved with the passage of commonsense gun laws.**