

# Hassenfeld Institute for Public Leadership

at Bryant University

## “Finding Common Ground In the School Safety Debate”

*A Hypothetical Case Scenario with Role Plays*

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## The Scenario

On the last school day in April, the unthinkable happens. Police are alerted to an active school shooting at a suburban high school in Rhode Island. Within moments, terrified parents learn their children are barricaded in classrooms while bullets are flying from a semi-automatic weapon.

The School Resource Officer (SRO) fires at the shooter and holds him off temporarily, but is injured in the crossfire. Although unable to assist further, the SRO is credited with stalling the shooter for a few precious moments until the police arrive.

The shooter makes his way into a classroom, where the mother of one of the students had been delivering a presentation for a local nonprofit. Fearful for her son and his classmates, she rummages through her purse for the canister of mace she carries. She lunges at the shooter, spraying him in the face, as he continues to fire. People later hail her as a hero. Had it not been for her chance presence in the classroom, the situation would have been far more tragic.

Police force their way into the locked school and bring down the shooter, who carried an AR-15 with multiple magazines, and a concealed handgun. The young mother, 15 students, a teacher and the SRO are rushed to the hospital, many in critical condition. In the hours and days that follow, several of the injured die from their wounds.

The shooter dies on the scene. It is learned that he graduated from this school four years ago. Fellow students remember him as a quiet kid who didn't engage in sports or after-school activities. Teachers remember him struggling in some classes and being "dark" and "hard to read." He has been living at home since he graduated. His parents always knew he was a little "withdrawn," but they had no idea he was considering attacking the school.

In the wake of this tragedy, students from Parkland, Fla., where 17 students were killed by a school shooter, visit Rhode Island in solidarity with the local students. They organize a march in front of the State House and demand a meeting with state and local leaders to talk about stricter gun laws and mental health education in the schools.

Meanwhile, Parkland student Kyle Kashuv, a gun rights advocate, has arrived to speak at an NRA march, where he will make the argument that the Second Amendment protects all other amendments.

Suddenly, the smallest state in the Union becomes the center of the school safety and gun rights debate.

Rhode Island recently passed a bump stock ban, but bump stocks were not used in this shooting. Although you need to be 21 to buy a pistol in Rhode Island, it is legal to purchase an AR-15 at the age of 18.

The Federal Assault Weapons Ban of 1994 expired in 2004, and the proposed federal Assault Weapons Ban of 2015 has not yet moved forward in the House. Several states have passed assault weapons bans, but Rhode Island is not one of them. However, the AR-15 is a semi-automatic weapon and is not classified as an assault weapon.

Rhode Island also recently passed a Red Flag law which allows the seizure of guns from individuals deemed a risk to self or others. However, the shooter never expressed any violent thoughts to classmates or on social media, so there were no clues that he might be violent.

The shooter legally purchased the AR-15 from a sporting goods store after he graduated high school. One month ago, the shooter obtained a RI Conceal Carry Permit after completing the 90-day waiting period and legally purchased a hand gun.

The NRA lobbyist is speaking to legislators to discourage them from considering restrictions on semi-automatic weapons like the AR-15, claiming that it would violate the constitutional rights of law-abiding citizens, in particular, the Second Amendment (right to bear arms) and Fourth Amendment (protection from search and seizure).

Mental health advocates are clamoring for mental health education in the schools and more resources for behavioral health care, claiming that this tragedy could have been averted if the shooter had been diagnosed and treated earlier. They are also expressing concern for current students with mental health conditions, who they fear may be stigmatized.

School Committees across the state are scrambling to respond to concerned parents in their own districts who are deeply worried that a similar tragedy could occur in their town. Some are taking advantage of new matching funds to hire SROs, but other school districts are having trouble affording their current SRO positions, which do not qualify for the new matching funds.

There are less than two months left in the legislative session and the school year, and the public is demanding action. State and municipal budgets are extremely tight.

## **Instructions**

Work with the stakeholders in your group (pro-gun control, anti-gun control, school committee member, mental health advocate, and parent advocate) to find common ground and identify solutions that achieve the goal of greater school safety while respecting the concerns of diverse interests.

## **Role Plays**

### **Role #1: Member of state legislature, in school district where shooting occurred, who favors increased gun control**

You are strongly in favor of increased gun control at the state level. You point out that 83% of Rhode Islanders support restricting concealed guns on school grounds. Yet, anyone with a Rhode Island Concealed Carry Permit (CCP) can bring his or her firearm into K-12 schools without the knowledge of police or school officials. You believe that police and peace officers are the only ones who should be allowed to carry a firearm on school grounds or have any access to weapons like the AR-15. You think Rhode Island should follow the lead of other states, like Connecticut, where the assault weapons ban has contributed to their becoming one of the states with the lowest rates of gun violence. RI should adopt this measure that is also in effect in MA, NY, NJ, MD, CA, HI and DC.

### **Role #2: Member of state legislature, in school district where shooting occurred, who is opposed to increased gun control**

You are shocked by the tragedy, and you have young children in the school district where the shooting occurred. But you're not convinced guns are the problem. As a veteran and sportsman, you believe strongly in responsible and safe gun ownership. However, you are concerned about threats to the Second and Fourth Amendment rights, particularly in the light of Rhode Island's new law Red Flag law that could seize weapons from a person deemed to be a risk to self or others. If a person makes harsh or offensive comments on social media, does that mean we can seize their guns? Do we risk also violating the First Amendment with severe limits on speech? You are a member of the NRA and the local lobbyist has been pressuring you to resist further gun restrictions and to promote arming of teachers. Maybe if there had been a teacher with a gun, there would have been fewer injuries.

**Role #3: School Committee member, Town Council member or other elected official in town where shooting occurred**

You are keenly aware of your responsibility to keep kids safe in their schools. Your own child was in the high school that day. While you and your colleagues search for solutions, parents have been calling, emailing and trolling you on social media, demanding that you take action. You've even received death threats and nasty messages have been tacked to your door while you were at work. Some people want more SROs. Some want mental health education. Some want to arm teachers. Some want metal detectors. You know you have to do something, but what? As a town official, you feel a special responsibility to find common ground and arrive at an agreement that respects the opinions of all constituents.

**Role #4: Mental health advocate demanding mental health education and better behavioral health services**

You have a school-age son who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and you are deeply worried that he will be stigmatized and ostracized following this event, even though he is gentle and kind. His school doesn't offer any mental health education, so his classmates and teachers have no understanding of his illness. It seems so unfair that his classmates with peanut allergies are given peanut-free zones, when your child can't even get an extension on a project if he's having a tough day.

While you are doing all you can to make sure your son gets the treatment he needs, you know that some students aren't being diagnosed early enough, and it's possible their illness could lead to violence. You know that you're lucky to have great insurance that covers the cost of doctors and therapists, but you hear from many parents who can't access the services they need for their children's mental health concerns. This presents a risk to everyone, but it's especially unfair to kids with mental illnesses.

You are demanding better behavioral health care services for youth and more mental health education for students and teachers. In addition, you are advocating side by side with doctors who have identified gun violence as a public health issue – specifically, the American Medical Association, which recently endorsed a variety of gun control measures.

**Role #5: Student or Parent Advocate**

Your beliefs align with several of the Parkland students, including Kai Koerber, a junior, who told CNN: "There is already some evidence that mental health training programs can reduce school violence and improve student performance." You also think that there should be an assault weapons ban, and that the AR-15 should be considered an assault weapon. You think it's ridiculous and even dangerous to arm teachers. You agree with the Parkland kids who see the NRA as their mortal enemy and call themselves the "mass shooting generation." You think it's time to reframe the debate along generational lines, and you are on a mission to mobilize young voters who will vote for candidates who favor gun reform.