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**School Superintendents Appeal for Action
By Gary Bixhorn and Lars Clemensen**

The murder of 17 students and teachers in the corridors of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, by a gunman armed with an AR-15 assault rifle is one more episode in a series of violent acts targeting our nation's youth. Now, Parkland joins Columbine, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech and dozens of other educational settings as the name of a crime scene, not a school. Our heartbreak increases as the list gets longer and longer. The Parkland tragedy reminds us that an American school shooting has taken place, on average, once per week in 2018, and it is only February.

Addressing this national epidemic demands bold action. Our national response must evolve to be more than just messages of "thoughts and prayers" and hand-wringing about our inability to stop this. The students in Florida want this to be the tipping point; they want this to be the "last mass shooting." This siren must get our attention. And this issue should be the one to galvanize our elected officials in Washington, state capitals and local communities. By rejecting mass shootings as a "new normal," the federal government has the chance to seize the grief and the anger of this overwhelming moment and act now. The nation is ready.

New York State passed sensible gun laws in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook massacre in neighboring Connecticut. This bipartisan measure includes many provisions that our national leaders can use as a model. Assault weapons, background checks, ammunition sales, mental health screenings and more, it's all in there. It wasn't perfect when it was passed, but through a series of amendments, it's been improved. We're certain that critics can identify several concerns about the law, but there are none that can't be resolved. Take New York State's SAFE Act and use it as a template for federal action.

The aftermath of a school shooting has become all too predictable. We need a multifaceted solution that addresses all of the issues that the Parkland students are now so eloquently articulating as a result of witnessing the horrific shooting and losing classmates and teachers to gun violence. It is the only way to make significant progress towards addressing this complex matter. We have a state law in place that can be used to initiate the essential national conversation, the SAFE Act, so why not use it? We understand that what we've done in New York may be a hard sell elsewhere, but all kids deserve this kind of protection. We do know that nothing will improve if we do nothing, and that is not an option.

We need such changes to be able to assure students, parents and staff that our schools are safe places. Ensuring that our students receive the highest-quality programs and services in a safe, secure environment is the goal of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association. It is a goal that is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. A recent survey of school superintendents statewide indicates that more than half of respondents have rising concerns about the needs of our students in non-academic areas, including health, safety and mental health. Our members partner with county, town and village police departments, as well as many other non-law enforcement organizations, understanding that these needs cannot be met without robust cooperation. Only this type of cooperation will enable us to fully address these problems.

To make progress, we need strong national leadership. We need our leaders to break the patterns that have resulted in inaction time and time again. We need them to be brave and do what we have elected them to do – lead. We must demand decency and collaboration by all involved. With civility, the availability of adequate resources and exhaustive planning, we can be successful. This work demands collaboration, compromise, discussion and mutual understanding. To this end, the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association stands ready to help in this effort in any way necessary.

As Americans, we must be capable of more than one thought and one non-negotiable action plan to address this problem. In doing so, we can meet today's challenges and achieve our goal of providing a safe, secure environment for all students. Our humanity demands it.

Gary Bixhorn is executive director and Lars Clemensen is president of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association.