

Forsyth County is failing our kids on school safety

 ajc.com/opinion/forsyth-county-is-failing-our-kids-on-school-safety/GJNEFFVH5JHZ3MIIAERFGON4AU/

A 14-year-old student brought a loaded 9-millimeter gun to Little Mill Middle School in Forsyth County this month. Another brave child prevented a tragedy by alerting the staff about the weapon. Sheriff Ron Freeman hailed the case as an example of how his “See Something, Say Something” policy works.

Instead of adults passing common-sense laws to keep children safe from gun violence — the No. 1 killer of kids and teens — leaders are tasking kids with preventing school shootings by running, hiding, fighting and telling on classmates.

“See Something, Say Something” has limitations. Another child at the school saw the boy with the weapon. Instead of alerting the authorities, this kid took videos of the loaded gun and posted them to social media. Two of the three children in this incident made poor choices, and the sheriff calls this strategy of relying on other kids to stop school shootings a success?

Freeman failed to mention that this situation illustrates why firearms need to be securely stored and inaccessible to children. Many parents in Forsyth County have been watching, discussing and waiting for more information on this story, and our sheriff squandered that important opportunity to educate people on safe storage.

He could have reminded people that owning a gun is a right and preventing it from getting into the wrong hands is the responsibility that comes with that right. He could have made people aware that 80% of school shooters obtained their firearms from the home of a parent or close relative. He could have told people that if a child gets a loaded gun from a locked container (as was reported to have happened in this case), it’s not stored properly. Kids should not know the code or where to find the key. The sheriff could have impressed upon the public the importance of keeping bullets separate from guns and suggested biometric locks that open with finger, face, eye or voice recognition that’s nearly impossible for children to breach.

Our community respects Freeman, and parents appreciate the program he oversees that stations school resource officers (SROs) in each school. But educating people about proper gun storage is another important aspect of maintaining public safety.



Credit: Handout

Jessica Fleming

How this middle schooler accessed his parents' weapon won't even matter to law enforcement because our state legislature failed to pass [House Bill 161](#). The Pediatric Safe Storage Act, sponsored by [Rep. Michelle Au](#) of John's Creek, would have made adults responsible for a child accessing a loaded firearm. As Au said, "Children are a special class of people that need protection, which is why we have gates around pools, child-safe

medication bottles, and car seats.” Republican lawmakers refused to bring it up for a vote and didn’t pass the bipartisan House Bill 971 that would have given people a \$300 tax credit for purchasing a gun safe.

When you talk to Republican lawmakers about school shootings, they often claim that it’s not about the guns, that it’s about mental health instead. Forsyth County fails kids in that area, too.

Our Board of Commissioners ditched a plan to build a mental health center. Instead, they approved spending \$114 million for an administrative campus with rooftop meeting spaces and balconies for each commissioner.

The National Institute of Justice found that the overwhelming majority of mass shooters are in a mental health crisis. Today in Forsyth County, we have no crisis stabilization unit to support and heal these kids besides the court and jail. Shouldn’t we try to help these children *before* they get to those places?

Suppose you are fortunate enough to prevent a student in crisis from harming himself or herself or others, but the child needs immediate mental health treatment. The child will be transported as far as Villa Rica or Savannah. Again, the people leading us shrug their shoulders while the burden falls on families.

To be sure, locking firearms and providing robust mental health treatment will not prevent every tragedy. But adults and elected leaders should take every precaution to ensure our children’s well-being.

Republican lawmakers want to micromanage every aspect of school, from the books students can read, the topics they can learn about and the bathrooms they can use. But when it comes to matters that could truly make a difference to our kids’ safety, such as keeping weapons away from minors and providing mental health treatment, they’re consistently too weak to act.

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