Executive Summary

The efforts of the Federal Commission on School Safety have been guided by the need to promote state and local solutions to school violence. To that end, the Commission conducted field visits, listening sessions, and meetings with hundreds of Americans all across the country. The input of these individuals—state and local policymakers, administrators, principals and teachers, law enforcement and healthcare professionals, students and their families—was critical in identifying best practices and the recommendations contained in this Report.

As set forth in the pages that follow, the work of the Commission falls into three broad categories:

a) Prevent—preventing school violence;
b) Protect and Mitigate—protecting students and teachers and mitigating the effects of violence; and
c) Respond and Recover—responding to and recovering from attacks.

The Commission’s work is summarized below.

Prevent

Character education and creation of a positive school climate: Character education and a positive school climate can help students feel connected to, rather than isolated from, teachers and fellow students. They can also help combat cyberbullying, an area where states, districts, and schools are developing and evaluating promising new approaches. Student-led efforts are critical to addressing cyberbullying. Firm and prompt responses to cyberbullying by staff are necessary as well as having suitable systems for the reporting of incidents.

Mental health: Improving access to school-based mental health and counseling for young people is an important aspect of prevention. So, too, is community involvement and support, including the faith community. Prescribing psychotropic medications for complex mental health needs should only be part of a broader treatment plan.

Integrating mental health, substance misuse, and other supportive services into school and pediatric settings can help early identification of needs and access to treatment. Testimony and information gathered from Commission listening sessions, site visits, and meetings noted a lack of school-based or easily accessible mental health professionals. Telephonic and telepsychiatry consultations have the potential to dramatically expand and enhance care.

Threat assessment: Beyond the school building and campus, informed and alert communities play a critical role in keeping our schools safe. Prior to most attacks, other students had concerns about the attacker, yet most did not report what they knew to a parent or other responsible adult. Outreach campaigns such as “If You See Something, Say Something®” and similar state-specific programs are essential to encouraging and facilitating the reporting of suspicious activities or other concerning behaviors. There are significant opportunities to customize or expand such efforts.

Suspicious activity reporting programs must incorporate appropriate privacy protections to ensure compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). However, confusion remains in some localities about whether and when student records can legally be shared during a health or safety emergency. Reducing this confusion can lead to greater compliance and appropriate reporting of threats to the safety of students and schools.

Press coverage: For optimal engagement with the media after a school safety incident, state and local authorities should develop a media plan as part of their broader crisis preparedness, response, and recovery plan. The “No Notoriety Campaign” (i.e., not using shooters’ names or photos, but instead focusing on facts and victims) is a policy that media outlets and communities across the country should consider.

Violent entertainment and rating systems: The role of the family is central to controlling violent entertainment. State and local educational agencies should collaborate with parents to strengthen internet safety measures to curb access to inappropriate content.
In addition, the entertainment industry should ensure its rating systems provide parents with the full complement of information needed to make informed decisions about entertainment for their children.

School discipline: Maintaining order in the classroom is a key to keeping schools safe. Teachers are best positioned to identify and address disorderly conduct. However, guidance issued by the prior Administration advocated a federal solution that undercut the ability of local officials to address the impact of disciplinary matters on school safety. The guidance also relies on a dubious reading of federal law. The guidance should be rescinded and information about resources and best practices for improving school climate and learning outcomes should be developed for schools and school districts.

Law enforcement: The available research does not support the conclusion that age restrictions for firearms purchases are effective in reducing homicides, suicides, or unintentional deaths. Most school shooters obtain their weapons from family members or friends rather than by purchasing them. States should consider offering training or other resources to promote safe storage of firearms.

Other recommendations include encouraging states to adopt laws permitting "extreme risk protection orders" (ERPOs), which can prevent individuals who pose a threat to themselves or others from possessing or purchasing firearms. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Public Access Line—a critical component of the FBI's efforts to keep Americans safe—has undergone changes to improve the process for receiving and evaluating tips from the public.

Protect and Mitigate

Training: All school personnel play a role in school safety and should take part in school safety training. Those best positioned to respond to acts of violence are those with specialized training such as school resource officers (SROs) who are generally sworn law enforcement officers. With respect to training and other related aspects of school safety, states and local policies and approaches should reflect their own unique circumstances and needs.

When a school shooting occurs, law enforcement officers are the ones who rush to the scene, neutralize the shooter, assist victims, and secure the site. The federal government provides a wide array of emergency and crisis training resources to state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies to help prevent, plan for, and respond to such incidents.

Troops to Teachers: Military veterans and retired law enforcement officers often possess the leadership, experience, and essential training to help ensure the safety and security of our nation's schools. As the Troops to Teachers program attests, veterans and retired law enforcement officers can also serve as highly effective educators where there are reduced barriers to certification and appropriate incentives are in place.

Building and campus security: Every school in America is different, and the appropriate protective measures will vary based on the characteristics of the site, location, resources, and personnel available. A risk assessment can identify vulnerabilities and enable the development of a strategy to address any security gaps.

Effective security plans use a layered approach across all three areas of a school: entry points, the building envelope (e.g., walls, roofs, windows, doors), and the classroom. An effective security plan can be especially valuable in rural areas, where law enforcement response times may be significantly longer than in more urban jurisdictions.

Respond and Recover

Active shooter preparedness: Reports prepared in the aftermath of school shootings have universally recognized the value of preparing for a potential active shooter incident through training, planning, and related strategies. According to some reports, total casualties could have been higher in Parkland, FL, had the school not provided active shooter preparedness training to staff (the latest training coming just six weeks before the shooting incident).