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WAVE statement on today's visit from Education Secretary Betsy DeVos

July 24, 2018—The Wisconsin Anti-Violence Effort Educational Fund welcomes Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to Wisconsin for her visit to the Adams-Friendship school district today for the purpose of discussing school safety.

As the chair of the federal school safety commission, Secretary DeVos has limited most of the testimony presented to the commission thus far to the issue of the mental health needs of students—an urgent topic that is worthy of both discussion and an investment of resources. However, to focus *only* on student mental health needs, in the context of school safety, gives short shrift to both issues.

Decades of research have shown that people—including children—in need of mental health care are far more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators. Meeting these students' needs is imperative to ensure they can continue to grow and learn—and requires no other justification. But providing mental health supports, while necessary, is not sufficient to prevent school violence.

Preventing violence requires a holistic approach including advocacy for stronger gun policies, because easy access to firearms exacerbates all other factors that contribute to school violence. Easy access to guns ensures that impulsive, angry, or desperate decisions are much more deadly than they would be otherwise. Stronger state policies, such as requiring background checks on all gun sales, banning assault weapons, requiring secure gun storage, and allowing for the removal of firearms from gun owners who have made credible threats of violence, would better protect students from deadly violence than our state's current, lax policies.

Educators, administrators, and school board directors know this. That is why dozens of school boards have passed resolutions in the past two years decrying a bill that would have repealed the background check and permit requirements for carrying concealed weapons and calling on the state legislature to maintain prohibitions on firearm possession on school grounds. At the bill's public hearing, over 400 people—most of them parents and many of them educators—turned out to testify against the notion that students would be safer in the presence of unregulated firearms, and the bill was defeated.

Secretary DeVos surely understands that students, parents, educators, and local elected officials are the stakeholders when it comes to school safety. We hope her visit affords her the opportunity to listen to and learn from these stakeholders in Wisconsin. We know their message to her is clear: meet students' mental health care needs, but keep them safe by enacting stronger gun laws.

Founded in 1997, the Wisconsin Anti-Violence Effort Educational Fund is Wisconsin's oldest and largest grassroots organization focused on preventing gun violence injuries and deaths through education and advocacy.