

Op-Ed: Heed Grand Jury Recommendations to Make Our Schools Safer
By Dave Aronberg

The day after the horrific mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, police arrested a student who brought two guns to Palm Beach Lakes Community High School, and a wave of local copycat threats frightened parents and frayed the nerves of our community.

The law enforcement response was swift and certain: even if it was only a sick joke or a cry for attention, every threat against a school is taken seriously. After the Florida Legislature's recent passage of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, threats of mass violence against a school are now a second degree felony, punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

In addition, the new state law could help protect our students by, among other things, allowing law enforcement to seize firearms from certain individuals who pose a danger to themselves or others; providing \$67 million to school districts statewide to hire additional mental health professionals; banning "bump stocks," which can turn a semi-automatic firearm into an automatic weapon; requiring a three-day waiting period for all firearms, or until the background check is complete, whichever is later; and prohibiting anyone under 21 from purchasing a firearm.

The new law, however, raised concerns by allowing certain school personnel, upon the approval of the local school board and Sheriff, to bring guns to school. This controversial provision, which already has been rejected by Palm Beach County officials, shows that our community cannot rely on Tallahassee — or for that matter, a dysfunctional federal government — to adequately address the problem of school violence.

That's why I convened an independent Special Grand Jury to investigate how our local government agencies are addressing the issue of school safety and whether changes are needed to better protect our students. The Grand Jury is an excellent vehicle for such a review, as it consists of a random cross-section of local citizens who meet in private with subpoena power while completely insulated from political pressure.

The Grand Jury heard sworn testimony and received evidence from a wide range of witnesses, including local and national experts in school safety, law enforcement professionals, teachers, school administrators, School Board Members and mental health experts. The result is a 72-page report that makes wide-ranging recommendations, from ideas on hardening schools and improving "Code Red" training, to improving school police-student ratios and focusing school counselors on their original mission.

Perhaps the most controversial section of the Grand Jury Report is when it enters the ongoing debate over the future of its separate police force for the School District. The Grand Jury Report did not take sides on which law enforcement agency — the School Board Police Department or the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office — is best equipped to keep our 193,000 students and 27,000 school employees safe, but the Report is clear that current staffing and funding levels for the School Police are inadequate. The Grand Jury found that the ratio of students to school police officers is 1684 to 1. In contrast, the City of Jupiter has a ratio of 583 citizens per one

officer. The ratio in the City of Boca Raton is 454 to 1; Boynton Beach is 448 to 1; and Delray Beach is 361 to 1.

One sensitive area largely absent from the Grand Jury Report is the subject of additional gun control. Although the Report examines the importance of mental health counselors and the lack thereof in our schools, the Grand Jury focused on local issues unique to Palm Beach County and mostly avoided issues of statewide and national application. My hope is that the Report will help start a larger conversation into guns and mental health, including more comprehensive background checks and a ban on military-style assault weapons.

The Grand Jury Report is a public record and should be reviewed by every local government official and law enforcement leader in Palm Beach County as an unbiased review of our current levels of school safety and preparedness. Palm Beach County schools continue to be safe places of learning, but there's room for improvement, and the Grand Jury Report should be a catalyst for meaningful change in the days ahead.

Dave Aronberg is the State Attorney for Palm Beach County.