

April 14th, 2018

The Honorable Senators Sears & Benning
Vermont State Legislature
Senate Judiciary Committee

Dear Senators,

I am a teacher at Fair Haven High School. I was the teacher that alerted the school that Jack Sawyer had issued a threat against our students on February 14th. I'm here to tell you what the last two months have been like from an inside perspective and to ask for your help to make sure no other teachers or students in Vermont EVER feel this way.

I never had Jack Sawyer as a student, however I've had to report him not once, but twice. I did my job. I reported what was a concern and passed on my information to the chain of command. And yet, after all we did RIGHT, the VT Supreme Court just ruled based on a 112 year old precedent that Jack didn't "attempt" anything, and he may very well walk free tomorrow.

Now let me tell you what this situation has done to my colleagues, my kids, and myself. And maybe, just maybe, after this letter you may be pushed to action. This is my most sincere hope.

On February 14th I got a call from a parent of a 2016 graduate, Jen Mortenson, that Jack had been in her house, she was worried about his behavior, and that he'd bought a gun. Fast-forward a week. At school we were praised for catching this horrible person before he was able to commit massive casualties. We were told he was held without bail and there was enough evidence to charge him with first-degree murder. We were on tenterhooks when the defense filed to dismiss his case, and even uneasy when Judge Zonay had to make his ruling on whether or not it was an "attempt". The anxiety in the building has caused myself, and three other teachers that I know of, to seek help and start anxiety medication and counseling. The school offered group trauma counseling, and we went about instructing our kids and doing our jobs to the best of our ability.

Now, when Zonay deemed Sawyer's actions to be dangerous and a true, "attempt" we all breathed a sigh of relief. Life went back to a "normal" feel at school, and our boys were able to lift our spirits and bring home a basketball championship. Then the news hit on a Monday that the defense was asking the Supreme Court to overturn Zonay's decision. The anxiety and fear in the building was palpable. Teachers were texting each other. Kids were asking, "What will we do?" And in between this time, we practiced our ALICE active shooter drills and had a security audit.

Our security audit said we were doing just fine. I find this laughable. Our school is outdated, dangerously accessible, and nothing has changed other than talking, and drilling for an active threat. It's disconcerting and has heightened our level of anxiety. Words will not help us. And a 200-year-old fire codes will kill us.

On the evening that I found out the Supreme Court was overturning the ruling on Mr. Sawyer I was in shock. I had two friends who were colleagues texting me asking, "Are we going to school?" "What will we do?" "Is he loose?" And then after barely being able to digest this information I had to go to school and teach my kids some history.

My kids were terrified.

My friends were terrified.

My mother and husband asked if it was worth my going to school.

I have one friend who is our French teacher who has already survived the terrorist attack in Nice, France. She can hardly stand to be in the building right now. She left early.

Two of my students had their parents come pick them up.

And one boy was so upset sitting in his seat he was shaking and could hardly ask to go to guidance for help.

This is the reality and the kind fear Jack Sawyer has inspired.

One of my friends who teaches math has taken a job elsewhere because she is tired of the stress.

Three special educators are interviewing elsewhere.

The French teacher is looking to leave the state.

The bottom line is we are struggling. I am struggling. I worry every day that when I go to school I'm never going to come home. Our "would be" event never happened. But that doesn't make it any less real. We saved ourselves and then the Supreme Court let us down. There are 460 souls in my building. My school is my home. I am loath to leave my position and my kids. This leaves me with one option- to ask for help.

PLEASE, for the love of God, help us. Help us keep our faculty, and our kids SAFE in school. We need updated security, and we need LEGISLATION to change these laws.

The actions of Jack Sawyer need to be made clear, and criminal. What he did needs to be made illegal to show others that that type of behavior, action, and threat will be treated with the ultimate finality and seriousness. Until this happens, we wait. We wait as sitting ducks do, for the threat we caught, that should have been put away for life, to come back to haunt us, and haunt us he will. Fair Haven is struggling. We need help.

Please, with all my heart, I'm asking you now, if anything matters in the world, this is it. Schools need to be safe, teachers need to teach, and kids need to be kids. Please help us.

Sincerely,

Julia S. Adams