



Tom Torlakson, California Superintendent of Public Instruction (2010-2018)

After Uvalde

During our darkest hours, we must focus to see the light

By [TOM TORLAKSON](#)

PUBLISHED EAST BAY TIMES / SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS: June 8, 2022 at 5:15 a.m.

1, 2, 19, 375, 89, 100, 10

Is there any way to make sense of these numbers? Or are we doomed to repeat the carnage of the past?

1 — A mad gunman to pull the trigger.

2 — Assault rifles. Military style weapons designed for murder ... purchased on 18th birthday.

375 — Rounds of ammo purchased on his birthday.

19 — Children with bright hopes and big dreams ... full of enthusiasm for life.

89 — Percent of Americans supporting universal background checks. The majority support additional gun reforms and gun safety measures.

100 — Percentage of sacrifice by two brave and dedicated teachers trying to shield their students from death in Uvalde, Texas.

10 — Years since Sandy Hook. But what has changed?

The screams and the deep anguish are gut wrenching. How can we work together to transform these numbers into positive statistics? How can we turn the tears and fears of the survivors into a new level of action and follow-through?

I believe the answer lies within the classic proverb, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Despite the horrific massacres, there are rays of light within the darkness. The key is to identify successful programs and amplify what is working. A few examples:

- **Giving students the tools to excel regardless of troubles they may have at home or in the neighborhood:** A student who walks through the school door with trauma is at risk not only academically but socially and emotionally. The Bakersfield City School District has had a terrific experience with choosing social and mental wellness programs for its 30,000 students. In particular, BCSD has selected the ToolBox Project establishing a common language by giving students the tools to have meaningful, empowering communication with teachers, fellow students and parents.

- **Building self-esteem and pathways to healthy futures through career technical education:** Over the decades after World War II, there was an unwise dismantling of vocational and career education such as carpentry, metal shop, automotive and electronics courses. Not every student wants to go to college right after high school. Many want to explore. I signed up for employment working on ships. I learned so much. Lincoln Unified School District in Stockton and the Mt. Diablo Unified School District in Contra Costa County are shining examples offering career pathway options, such as those in computer science, the building trades, hospitality, culinary arts and visual and performing arts.

• **Identifying and supporting our most at-risk adolescents:** The Washington Unified School District in West Sacramento is in a partnership with a non-profit that provides their most vulnerable students a sense of belonging and connection. This becomes the basis for mental and physical wellness. Green Light Get Outside benefits students through opportunities to build trust and empathy with mentors and teachers. These students often experience trauma and have the least supportive home environments. Green Light's unique combination of outdoor education, mentoring and team building are having a profound effect.

These few examples are among the many positive programs in our California schools. Let's hope and work together for the investments and program expansions needed for change. We can create lasting reform. We must act now.

Tom Torlakson, California Superintendent of Public Instruction (2010-2018), is the founder of the [Torlakson Whole Child Institute](#).

EAST BAY TIMES

San Jose Mercury News

After Uvalde

During our darkest hours, we must focus to see the light

By Tom Torlakson

1, 2, 19, 375, 89, 100, 10.

Is there any way to make sense of these numbers? Or are we doomed to repeat the carnage of the past?

1 — A mad gunman to pull the trigger.

2 — Assault rifles. Military style weapons designed for murder ... purchased on 18th birthday.

375 — Rounds of ammo purchased on his birthday.

19 — Children with bright hopes and big dreams ... full of enthusiasm for life.

89 — Percent of Americans supporting universal background checks. The majority support additional gun reforms and gun safety measures.

100 — Percentage of sacrifice by two brave and dedicated teachers trying to shield their students from death in Uvalde, Texas.

10 — Years since Sandy Hook. But what has changed?

The screams and the deep anguish are gut-wrenching. How can we work together to transform these numbers into positive statistics? How can we turn the tears and fears of the survivors into a new level of action and follow-through?

I believe the answer lies within the classic proverb, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

The young people who end up making these terrible decisions are the exception and not the norm in our schools. To help them, let's focus on initiatives that cultivate healthy relationships and better communication while fostering greater sense of belonging. The ultimate solution is to empower our youth with the competencies necessary for academic and life success. With healthy beliefs in themselves, the next potential shooters

may be prevented from reaching that dark place where they viciously want to harm others.

Despite the horrific massacres, there are rays of light within the darkness. The key is to identify successful programs and amplify what is working. A few examples:

- Giving students the tools to excel regardless of troubles they may have at home or in the neighborhood.

A student who walks through the school door with trauma is at risk not only academically but socially and emotionally. The Bakersfield City School District has had a terrific experience with choosing social and mental wellness programs for its 30,000 students. In particular, BCSD has selected the ToolBox Project establishing a common language by giving students the tools to have meaningful, empowering communication with teachers, fellow students and parents.

- Building self-esteem and pathways to healthy futures through career technical education.

Over the decades after World War II, there was an unwise dismantling of vocational and career education such as carpentry, metal shop, automotive and electronics courses. Not every student wants to go to college right after high school. Many want to explore. I signed up for employment working on ships. I learned so much.

Lincoln Unified School District in Stockton and the Mt. Diablo Unified School District in Contra Costa County are shining examples offering career pathway options, such as those in computer science, the building trades, hospitality, culinary arts and visual and performing arts.

- Identifying and supporting our most at-risk adolescents.

The Washington Unified School District in West Sacramento is in a partnership with a nonprofit that

provides their most vulnerable students a sense of belonging and connection. This becomes the basis for mental and physical wellness.

Green Light Get Outside benefits students through opportunities to build trust and empathy with mentors and teachers. These students often experience trauma and have the least supportive home environments. Green Light's unique combination of outdoor education, mentoring and team building are having a profound effect.

These few examples are among the many positive programs in our California schools. Let's hope and work together for the investments and program expansions needed for change. We can create lasting reform. We must act now.

Tom Torlakson is a former California superintendent of public instruction and founder of the [Torlakson Whole Child Institute](#).
