

Siri Panchumarthi
The Hockaday School, Dallas, TX
9th Grade

A little girl walks into her classroom on the first day of school, her pink backpack almost bigger than she is. Her hands still smell faintly of crayons, the same hands that spend afternoons coloring suns and stick-figure families without worry. She takes her seat, excited to learn, and looking around at other enthusiastic classmates. Minutes later, those same hands will press tightly over her ears as the classroom lights switch off during a lockdown drill, her teacher whispering for everyone to stay quiet. Somewhere between crayons and silence, my generation learned a different meaning of freedom.

For students today, one of the most important civil rights issues is the question of safety in schools and how it connects to gun rights. Unlike previous generations, we have grown up practicing lockdown drills as routinely as fire drills. Discussions about constitutional rights are not distant political debates for us; they shape our daily environment. We learn history while understanding that history is still being written around us. Because of this, many young people are asking a question central to every civil rights movement: *what does it truly mean to be free?*

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s–70s showed that freedom in America has never been equally experienced. Activists marched, protested, and organized because the nation's promise of liberty did not match reality for many Americans. Their slogans and songs united people across backgrounds, reminding the country that freedom required courage, sacrifice, and collective responsibility. They fought to make real in everyday life the ideals which were written into law.

Today, my generation faces a different challenge, yet one rooted in the same struggle to define freedom fairly. The United States protects individual liberties, including the right to bear arms, which many Americans see as essential to personal freedom. At the same time, students live with the consequences of how those rights exist within society. Classrooms, places once meant for curiosity and growth, now include emergency procedures designed for worst-case scenarios. This creates a tension between freedom as personal liberty and freedom as the ability to feel safe.

To me, freedom is not just the absence of restriction, but the presence of security and peace of mind. It is walking into school thinking about friendships, lessons, and future dreams instead of drills, exits, and hiding places. Freedom means being able to focus on becoming who you are without fear of interrupting that process. Rights are meaningful, but freedom feels incomplete when fear becomes part of ordinary life. In many ways, generally, Americans today are more free than during the Civil Rights Movement. Laws have expanded protections and challenged inequalities that once defined entire systems. Yet freedom is not a completed achievement passed unchanged from one generation to the next. Each generation must reconsider what freedom requires in its own time. For mine, freedom includes asking whether safety should be

recognized as an essential part of civil rights; not separate from liberty but connected to it.

Young people across the country have begun addressing these issues through conversations, advocacy, and peaceful action. Even without political power, students raise awareness because these debates directly affect our lives. Sometimes young voices are dismissed as inexperienced, yet living through lockdown drills gives us a perspective shaped by reality. Wanting our voices to be heard, regarding our own safety, is not rejecting freedom; it is participating in democracy. If I had to define freedom in one sentence, it would be this: freedom is the confidence that your ordinary day will remain ordinary. It is the assurance that learning and growing can happen without fear overshadowing possibility. The Civil Rights Movement teaches us that freedom expands when people ask difficult questions and work together toward a more just future. My generation is continuing that work by asking how liberty and safety can exist together rather than in opposition.

True freedom should not force a choice between rights and security; it should protect both. The little girl with the pink backpack walks into school believing she is safe enough to dream. Freedom, ultimately, means making sure she never has to unlearn that belief. When every student can sit in a classroom thinking only about learning, laughing, and imagining tomorrow, freedom will no longer be something we pray for during drills: it will be something we truly live.