

**The Bill Blackwood
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**A Case for Arming Teachers and Administrators in
Public Schools with Firearms**

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ABSTRACT

A major issue facing public schools in America is whether to permit teachers and administrators to carry concealed firearms. The country is polarized on the issue. Public schools should allow qualified teachers and administrators to carry concealed firearms. Although police departments have improved in responding to active shooters, time is still a factor. Having armed police officers at every school would be ideal, but it is not economically realistic, especially during these hard economic times. Arming teachers and administrators would serve as a deterrent.

Arguments against arming teachers and administrators are based on teachers' and administrators' mindset, training, mental health services, technology, and gun free zones. The problem with many of the arguments against arming teachers and administrators is the all or nothing mentality. It is not being suggested that everyone carry firearms, only the teachers and administrators who are willing and are properly qualified. Mental health services is important in making schools safer, but the research showed that some active shooters were already receiving or had received mental health services (Rosenberg, n.d.). Technology may slow down an active shooter, but it will not stop them. An active shooter is not going to be stopped by a gun free zone sign, it may even embolden them. Gun free zones are good, but only if it is advertised that some teachers and administrators are carrying concealed firearms.

The country is very diverse in its views of arming teachers and administrators. States should decide whether their school districts should have armed teachers and administrators. Individual school districts should have the final say as to whether to arm their teachers and administrators.

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INTRODUCTION

A major issue that has taken center stage across America today is whether school teachers and administrators should be armed with firearms in public schools from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Over the last several years, there have been numerous shootings at public schools. The following is a partial list of mass murders in American schools: 12 students and one teacher killed at Columbine High School, a teacher, a security guard, and five students were killed in Red Lake Minnesota, and 20 children and six others were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary ("Timeline," n.d.). Many school districts have added school resource officers, but due to economic reasons, some school districts have had to either eliminate or not hire additionally needed officers. According to the US Justice Department, the number of city police officers working at schools increased almost 40% between 1997 and 2007 (as cited in Ferriss, 2013). Many rural school districts do not have armed police officers in any of their schools. Most elementary schools across the country do not have school resource officers. Some teachers and school administrators could be trained to carry firearms in their schools. Arming teachers would be more cost effective for those districts that cannot afford to hire a police officer. An active shooter has many entrances to choose from to enter a school. Having teachers and administrators armed throughout the school would help mitigate this issue. School districts should have the option to arm qualified teachers and administrators with firearms in their schools.

POSITION

Time is a factor when dealing with a suspect armed with a gun in a school. School districts should arm teachers and administrators because they can provide an

immediate armed response to confront armed suspects. When police responded in the past, they used to set up a perimeter and wait for the SWAT team to arrive to take over the incident. Police learned that their response was costing innocent lives.

Historian Jennifer Rosenberg (2003) detailed a timeline of the Columbine Massacre. In part, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School at 11:14 am and planted two 20-pound propane bombs in the crowded lunch room. They went back to their vehicles to wait for the explosions that never came. It was thought that if the bombs had detonated, up to 488 students would have been killed. Klebold and Harris started shooting students outside of the cafeteria. At 11:25 am, Harris exchanged gunfire with an arriving police officer, but neither were injured. Harris and Klebold entered the school and continued to shoot victims and throw bombs until at about 12:05 pm, when they committed suicide (Rosenberg, 2003).

Now, current active shooter training instructs that a lone police officer can enter the school and confront the shooter. This has reduced the time it takes police officers to engage a suspect once they are on the scene, but it does not address the response time of officers responding from a patrol district. Arming teachers and administrators would help with this issue.

Many rural school districts in small towns rely on the state police or the sheriff's department to respond (Buerger & Buerger, 2010). Response times for these departments can be 20 minutes or more due to staffing and varied patrol responsibilities (Buerger & Buerger, 2010). Their lengthy response time can also be a result of the large areas they have to patrol. Rural schools are often much smaller and compress both distance and time which negatively affects the variables of refuge and escape (Buerger

& Buerger, 2010). An active shooter could find all of the doors in a school locked in a short period of time, exit the school, and either shoot through several classroom windows and gain entry in to a classroom through a window (Buerger & Buerger, 2010). Greg Lund, a former school principal in Minnesota who works with the National Association of Certified Firearms Instructors to train gun owners, carried a gun for years on his hip at his school (Bindley, 2012). Lund said that, in a rural area, police arrival was unpredictable since the local law enforcement agency only had one officer on duty at any given time (Bindley, 2012). Nebraskan State Senator Mark Christensen said, when speaking about arming teachers, that if someone enters a school to shoot someone, it is best to have someone there to handle the situation (Khadaroo, 2011). In Texas, the Harrold Independent School District, since 2007, has allowed staff members to carry concealed handguns. The Harrold Independent School Superintendent, David Thweatt, oversees the policy and says there are people other than law enforcement who can act responsibly in regards to carrying firearms (Khadaroo, 2011).

Employing enough police officers or school resource officers at every school would be ideal, but it is not economically realistic. With shrinking budgets and hard economic times, there is a lot of competition for dwindling funds. Arming teachers and administrators is a more cost effective way to provide security at schools that have no armed officers and can supplement schools that have some armed officers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Walshe, 2013), America has 132,183 schools. The National Association of School Resource Officers revealed that almost one-third of public schools in America have School Resource Officers (as cited in Person, 2013). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there are about

760,000 state and local law enforcement officers in America (as cited in IACP, 2012). The White House is proposing a request for \$150 million to help schools hire 1,000 new police officers for schools (Ferriss, 2013). Using the figures cited by Walshe (2013), IACP (2012), and Person (2013), over 85,000 schools have no police officers assigned to them. Roughly 11% of all of the nation's current police officers would have to be reassigned to have an officer at every school.

Arming teachers and administrators could be a deterrent to anyone thinking about initiating an armed attack in a school. An analysis of multiple-victim public shootings from 1977 through 1999 revealed that states that enact right-to-carry laws have about a 60% decrease in occurrences of attacks and a 78% decrease in the rates that people are killed or maimed in attacks (Lott, 2005). Research also indicated that since 1997, about a third of the public school shootings were stopped by the help of armed citizens before police arrived on the scene (Lott, 2005). Most active-shooter school protocols involve notification of the police, lockdown procedures, minimize the target profile, and wait for the police to arrive to handle the incident (Buerger & Buerger, 2010). Although these protocols are important because they can save lives, it is not enough to actively protect children and staff. In the tragedies at Columbine and Newtown, numerous victims were killed in lockdown waiting for police response (Cafarello, 2013). The justice department found, in annual surveys of crime victims, that if confronted by a criminal, citizens are safest if they possess a gun (Lott, 2005). Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, an expert on human aggression and violence, believes that a killer is more apt to attack unarmed citizens than citizens who are likely armed (Wylie, 2010). PoliceOne conducted a survey of 15,000 law enforcement officers

and found that 86% of officers surveyed felt that casualties would have been lessened or averted if a legally armed citizen had been on the scene at the recent shootings at Aurora and Newtown (Avery, 2013). The survey also found that 81% of the officers believe that teachers and administrators should be armed (Avery, 2013).

COUNTER POSITION

The main opposition against arming teachers and administrators are in the areas of teacher and administrator mindset, training, mental health services, technology, and gun free zones. Critics often believe that teachers and administrators do not have the right mindset to carry a gun and possibly use lethal force. Those in the teaching field picked the profession because they wanted to teach children and be supportive, not some day have to shoot one of them in a lethal force encounter. Arming teachers seems to go against the very core beliefs of a teacher wanting to help and nurture children. Dennis Roekel, president of the National Education Association, said that most teachers do not want to be armed (Margasak, 2012). Roekel added that every school situation is different and the union has supported some schools that wanted to add trained officers (Margasak, 2012). When over 10,000 educators were surveyed by a company in Utah, they found that nearly 75% would not bring a firearm to school if it was permitted (Toppo, 2013). The survey also found that of those teachers and administrators who own guns, only about 33% would probably bring the gun to school. (Toppo, 2013). Van Brocklin (2013), who has experience as a teacher and state and federal prosecutor, said she does not think that teachers should be armed. Van Brocklin (2013) carries a gun and has completed several tactical pistol training courses alongside law enforcement officers. Van Brocklin (2013) was humbled when she failed

a firearms training simulator by shooting several innocent people and getting herself killed several times without saving anyone. Van Brocklin (2013) noted that an elevated heart rate, tunnel vision, and hearing problems made simple tasks difficult.

The argument for not arming teachers is the all or nothing mentality of the opposition. This is not surprising. In 2002, news broadcasts on three major networks often described gun crime, but did not have one segment on a citizen using a firearm to stop a crime (Lott, 2005). Many allude to the fact it would be dangerous to arm all teachers and administrators. For example, Brian Sieble, an attorney at the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, says not to give all teachers guns and hope nothing bad happens ("Up in Arms," 2008). Certainly, not all teachers and administrators need to be permitted or forced to be armed at school. It would be as dangerous to arm all teachers and administrators as it would be to arm everyone in society. Some people, especially in a country of over three hundred million people, are just not qualified to possess firearms due to factors like: age, criminal backgrounds, mental illness, poor shooting skills, inability to train, and mind-set. There would have to be standards set up by the state to govern the eligibility and requirements of teachers who could carry a firearm at school. The training would have to be more than just a concealed handgun licensing class. It would have to include training in things like firearms and crisis intervention. Texas Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst wants the state to fund specialized training for teachers and administrators (Venturo, 2013). Dewhurst went on to say that school districts could nominate who they wanted to be armed in their schools (Venturo, 2013). The arrival of someone with a gun on the scene of a multiple-victim shooting is the biggest factor determining the amount of injury inflicted (Lott, 2005). The

focus should never be on arming teachers for the sake of arming teachers, but to arm some qualified teachers to make the school safer. Some schools may not have anyone who can qualify to carry a firearm at school.

Other opponents to arming teachers cite technology and lockdown procedures as the root to combating school massacres. Safety experts looking back on the Sandy Hook Elementary massacre say that security measures were not lacking at the school (Shah, Maxwell, Sparks, Ujifusa, & Zubrzycki, 2013). They cited that Lanza was delayed for a few seconds from just being able to walk easily in to the school. Teachers and others herded students in to locked rooms while the principal and the school psychologist confronted Lanza (Shah et al., 2013). The executive director of the National School Safety Center said many things were done very well at Sandy Hook, but, sometimes, on their best days, schools have limits (Shah et al., 2013). School safety expert Ken Trump told ABC News that teachers did what they could do to protect the children at Sandy Hook Elementary.

There were many acts of heroism at Sandy Hook Elementary to protect and save the children. Teachers lost their lives protecting their students. Lockdown procedures undoubtedly saved lives, but it must be supplemented with more to protect children. Merely sitting and waiting for the police to arrive may work in some instances but not all. Good intentions do not always equal good laws (Lott, 2005). Too many laws disarm law-abiding citizens, not criminals (Lott, 2005).

Other experts say that metal detectors and cameras will not prevent school massacres. On the same day of the Columbine Massacre a one million dollar security system was installed in the school (Fratt, 2006). All of that technology did

almost nothing to protect the students from being victimized. Lieutenant Colonel Grossman cited in one seminar how two unarmed security guards were the first to be shot manning a metal detector (Naese, 2013). Although the security guards were not teachers, it still demonstrates the vulnerability exposed in gun free zones. The only people who obey the gun free zone signs are the law abiding citizens. Criminals are not going to halt their behavior just because of a gun free zone sign. That is why they are called criminals. If the guards or a teacher would have been armed, they would have at least stood a chance.

Others cite the importance of mental health screening in combating school shootings. Garret Virchick, a Boston area teacher for 25 years, said focusing on arming teachers goes against the reasons teachers went in to the field because they are caregivers (Bindley, 2012). Virchick supports mental health screening and counseling (Bindley, 2012). In reference to violent school deaths covering 2004-2005 and the first three months of the 2005-2006 school years, Dale Yeager, who is the president of Seraph Inc., a school safety training firm, said, "Every school shooting was preventable" (Fratt, 2006, p. 32). He believes that schools need to have a system to identify violent students and proactively intervene in their lives (Fratt, 2006).

Klebold and Harris were put in to a juvenile diversion program in 1998 after breaking in to a van (Rosenberg, 2003). Part of the plea agreement was that they had to meet with counselors. They convinced everyone they were sorry for what they did while they continued to plan an attack on their high school. In a report released by Connecticut Police, a nurse at the Yale Child Studies Center said Lanza's mother refused to give him prescribed antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs and she did not

reschedule a follow-up appointment that he missed (“Police Release Documents,” 2013). The report also said that although Lanza showed an interest in mass shootings and firearms, he did not display any aggressive or threatening tendencies (“Police Release Documents,” 2013).

Opponents of arming school teachers say that school shootings are rare. They say that arming teachers makes students less safe, not safer (“Up in Arms,” 2008). Randal Stephens, the executive director of the National School Safety Center, said major school violence remains rare, saying that during the 2009-2010 only 25 deaths were considered homicide (Shah et al., 2013). He went on to say there is a sense of one-upmanship in that when some of the violent plots were prevented, the would-be assailants said they planned on making Columbine look like kindergarten stuff (Shah et al., 2013). Lieutenant Colonel Grossman said there is no survival value in denial. Grossman said that arming good guys in schools prevents massacres (Naese, 2013). Having concealed carriers on campus is a deterrent as long as it is advertised that someone on campus is armed and an attack will be dealt with immediately (Naese, 2013).

RECOMMENDATION

Teachers and administrators should have the option of being armed at school. It should be left up to the states as to whether schools should have the option of arming their teachers. And then individual school districts should have the option of arming their teachers. Arming some teachers would help mitigate the response time of the police. It would also be more economical especially for smaller school districts that cannot afford hiring a full time police officer. Lieutenant Colonel Grossman said

concealed carriers on campus is a good thing. Grossman cited that in 2006, Utah passed a law allowing concealed carry on campus and by 2012, nearly every school had some staff carrying concealed weapons (Naese, 2013). In that time period, there were no school homicides in Utah schools (Naese, 2013).

The opposition to arming school teachers has some good points. The all or nothing mentality of the argument that all teachers cannot be trained to effectively carry firearms in schools is a dishonest argument. Anything to an extreme is bad. It is not being suggested that all teachers be armed, but only those who want to be armed and can qualify to carry. Technology and improved mental health services are important, but they are not a cure all. When confronted with school safety measures, shooters find a way in to a school. Klebold, Harris, and Lanza had all been in counseling before they went on their rampages. As far as gun free zones, they are good as long some qualified teachers are allowed to carry concealed firearms.

It is not suggested that arming some school teachers is the only answer to making schools safer. It supplements the counterpoints when all else fails. America is a diverse country with different views on how to make schools safer. Individual states should have the right to provide security in their schools the way they see fit. Of the states that permit concealed carry on school campuses, it should be left up to the individual school districts as to arm or not arm some teachers.

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