



ARMING EDUCATORS: INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

By John Rosiak, Principal, Prevention Partnership

School safety is a critical issue today in communities across the U.S. Safer and healthier schools are "co-produced" by a collaboration of many different partners, including School Resource Officers (SROs) and their supervisors, school administrators and staff, and many others. The business of making our schools safer is a multi-disciplinary endeavor where many different actors in the community coordinate their respective roles, according to their knowledge, abilities, and training.

As a practitioner in the field of safe schools for over 35 years, I have worked with many different players in the busi-

ness of trying to make our schools safe and healthy. I have learned much from these different partners and continue to reach out to people from varied disciplines for their insights into sound ways to advance school safety.

States across the country have proposed arming educators as an approach to school safety. Some people see this as a solution to address gun violence in our nation's schools. In May of 2019 I was asked to develop an amicus curiae—"friend of the court"—brief related to a case before the Ohio Supreme Court (*Gabbard v Madison Local School District*) about arming and training teachers to fire arms.

The case centered on two particular issues:

- 1 What safety risks are involved in having teachers and other school staff with inadequate training carry guns in school; and
- 2 Why a certain amount (27 hours) of firearms training is insufficient training for those educators.

In order to articulate an informed point of view, I reached out to seasoned professionals from around the country—law enforcement officers, educators, judges, attorneys, and researchers. As one researcher pointed out right up front,

"There is no good science yet on either side about whether or not arming teachers makes schools safer." That said, until sound research is conducted, we can learn from the valuable perspectives of professionals who have labored in this field for many years. The fact is that we must deal with these issues today, so let's use the best available wisdom we can glean from all sources. It is in this manner that we need to carry out the school safety mission.

I turned to these varied individuals, who are all well-versed in the issue at hand, and asked for their perspectives on arming educators, and the issue of training them. Twenty professionals from across the country replied, weighing in with their views. Their responses are incorporated below.

CLARITY OF ROLES

- In carrying out the school safety mission we need to be clear about roles.

In school safety, as in any other social endeavor, we must have well-defined roles for all of the parties involved. In our communities, a law enforcement officer's role includes using a firearm if absolutely necessary for reasons of public safety. A number of colleagues noted that law enforcement officers have extensive training (which may range from about 700 to 1000 hours, or 4 to 6 months), plus field training, along with a background check, and an examination for mental fitness, to carry out their public safety role. An educator's role is different. As a veteran school principal and superintendent who served in several different states noted: "Using a firearm is not the role of an educator, plain and simple. That is not what they signed up for. I can think of no justification for arming teachers/staff. Not only is it not their role, I believe it puts everyone—students and staff—in danger."

- A firearm is not part of an educator's toolkit.

Carrying a firearm would be distracting from their educational mission. Many professionals from different disciplines believe that arming educators poses safety risks that would result in more harm to the school community. As one veteran School Resource Officer put it (echoing the viewpoint of many of his peers), "Teachers did not sign up for the role of law enforcement and the potential to take a life. A firearm is standard equipment for a

law enforcement officer, not an educator." One retired state Supreme Court justice draws this analogy: "It's analogous to stores arming sales associates. Stores do have security guards, but they are not salespersons. They are specifically trained protection officers who are bonded and insured—proven to handle situations involving force. Arming those not trained and not acting in a security position full-time promotes a more dangerous situation—a macho OK Corral western scenario."

SAFETY RISKS RELATED TO ARMING EDUCATORS

- There are major risks associated with responding to the challenge of acting under fire.

A common and reasonable concern about arming educators is that law enforcement officers, responding to the scene of a potential shooter on campus, may not be able to distinguish "friendly fire" when they arrive. As one researcher noted: "If they see staff with guns, what would prevent the police from shooting the staff?" As another researcher put it: "It's unlikely an armed teacher will stop someone before they inflict harm, and the likelihood that the armed staff will inflict additional harm in the process is too great." One police chief expressed the concern this way: "What happens when law enforcement arrives and sees the person with the gun, not realizing it's a friendly and not the suspect... that scares me, for sure."

- The educator could lose control of the firearm by being overpowered by students, or having a gun stolen.

This could result in any manner of danger, including accidental discharge. As another state Supreme Court justice notes "The teacher untrained in defensive tactics could easily be overpowered by a student, or the weapon may be taken from the desk drawer where the teacher routinely stores it while teaching." This perspective relates to the requirement of law enforcement agencies to have a higher level of "weapon retention" in the holsters of officers, making it more difficult for anyone other than the officer to pull the gun.

- There can be unintended harm to innocent victims.

As one educator who has been a superintendent for over 25 years shared, "I am concerned that educators will be more likely to shoot themselves or a bystander." A researcher states, "The room for unnecessary harm to potentially violent intruders, not to mention bystanders, is huge." Another researcher shared his view that "It's possible that such guns could deter or stop a shooting, but it seems equally plausible that such guns could: 1) Shoot someone accidentally or unnecessarily; or 2) Result in a teacher getting shot because they are mistaken for a shooter." Yet another school safety researcher says, "Per every law with good intentions (e.g., zero tolerance



in schools) the unintended consequences are enormous. The goal of preventing deaths by gun... by adding guns is MUCH more likely to be harmful than beneficial."

- Arming educators can cause trauma to students who will be concerned by knowing that those who educate them are carrying firearms.

A veteran School Resource Officer and crisis intervention team trainer raised the question, "If worn open, or if the students had knowledge of the weapon in the classroom, would this elicit some type of reaction/trauma based on the student's life experience(s)?" A researcher added, "The argument [against arming educators] does not even begin to touch on the trauma that arming teachers (or police) will have on students who are marginalized and disenfranchised in the community."

- Arming educators means more guns in school.

As a School Resource Officer noted: "If we allow teachers to carry, then we are bringing multiple guns into the building every day. That means that a student having a bad day now has access to weapons that they may not have had access to at home."

REGARDING TRAINING OF TEACHERS AND STAFF

- Respect the role of an educator; don't spend time and money to train them.

Educators are not equipped to be involved in a shooting at school; they are trained for other roles. Using a firearm is simply not an educator's role, so firearms training for educators is inappropriate. Therefore, no specific number of hours of training of educators matters.

As one judge active on the national scene put it: "No amount of training will bring [educators] to a place in which they can manage a shootout in a school." He goes on to say that, "We are committing negligent policy-making by knowing these truths about firearms in the hands of people with no law enforcement experience. We will risk innocent students becoming the victims of stray gun fire." As a state Supreme Court justice expressed: "In my view, no amount of training of an educator can adequately prepare the educator



to carry out a function that is not theirs." A long-time school administrator says: "There is no amount of additional training a teacher could possibly undertake to prepare them."

- Using a firearm is precarious business, even for highly trained law enforcement officers.

The likelihood of highly trained officers actually hitting a target in high-stressed situations is low. A notable study of New York City police officers (2008) reported that trained officers only hit their targets about 18% of the time during an actual shooting in the field. If trained public safety officers—who can more easily fall back on their extensive peace officer training and acquired muscle memory for responding—have a low likelihood of actually shooting someone perpetrating an act of violence, how can educators be expected to perform that task? As one researcher expounded, "I also know about armed response having been myself a police officer; there is a lot more that goes into a rapid armed response, and there is a false belief that either untrained or even trained individuals can effectively carry out such a response."

- Training for using a firearm must be extensive and ongoing.

Law enforcement officers must qualify to work for their agency with background investigations, extensive and ongoing training, and ongoing firing range qualification to use a firearm. This amount of training and background checking is not something that school districts could practically manage.

- No training is sufficient for educators.

While some may argue that you can provide educators with sufficient training to handle a firearm, the realities of operating a weapon in a high stress situation mean that, practically speaking, no amount of training

makes sense for educators. As one national teacher trainer and curriculum author notes: "Anyone can learn to mechanically fire a pistol. That is not preparation for a moment in time when it may be needed. The likelihood of error is huge. People who are trained and assessed as they pursue careers in law enforcement have a specific, guarded disposition toward the use of guns. It is part of their profession and should be left to the law enforcement professionals." And, as one judge says, "I oppose arming educators. No amount of training will bring them to a place in which they can manage a shootout in a school."

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

While training educators to be armed has been proposed as a solution to gun violence in schools, there are a number of problems with this approach. Professionals from many disciplines offer valuable perspectives to conclude that educators in school should not be armed.

Arming educators poses many risks to the health and safety of the school community. Many of these risks are associated with the realities of having more guns in schools. Other risks are posed by the challenges of responding to an actual shooting situation: Armed educators are more likely to inflict harm on an innocent bystander, or cause confusion when a law enforcement officer responds to a shooting scene. Another risk is that an educator could lose control of the firearm by being overpowered by students, or having a gun stolen. In addition, arming educators can cause trauma to students who will be concerned by knowing that those who educate them are carrying firearms.

Finally, no amount of training in operating a firearm matters for school staff, because using a gun in school is not the role of an educator. That is the role of well-trained and well-chosen public safety officers assigned to work in schools.

John Rosiak is an educator, trainer, and facilitator who has supported school/law-enforcement partnerships around the country since the 1980s. He is the founder of Prevention Partnerships, www.rosiakassociates.com, which provides training and technical assistance in support of safer and healthier communities.

