

Arming Teachers Introduces New Risks Into Schools

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Introduction

During the 2023–2024 school year, there were 49 deaths from gunfire on US school grounds and an additional 116 injuries.¹ Parents, educators, and schoolchildren alike are frightened by the gun violence occurring in American schools and are seeking meaningful action to keep our communities safe.

Lawmakers and schools are responding with a range of solutions—including the idea that arming teachers and school staff will make our schools safe. Decades of study of school shooting incidents and law enforcement responses, however, tell us that an armed teacher cannot, in a moment of extreme duress and confusion, be expected to transform into a specially trained law enforcement officer. An armed teacher is much more likely to shoot a student bystander or be shot by responding law enforcement than to be an effective solution to an active shooter in a school.²

Further, those closest to the issue oppose arming teachers. That includes the nation's two largest teachers' organizations, representing millions of educators and staff—the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association.³ And it includes the National Association of School Resource Officers, which opposes arming teachers due to the risk it poses to law enforcement and the armed teachers themselves.⁴ Furthermore, the former president and executive director of the Major Cities Chiefs Association, representing 75 police forces from large cities in the United States and Canada, agree that arming teachers is “not a good idea.”⁵

Instead, we need evidence-based solutions that address underlying causes of school gun violence and that prevent guns from coming into schools in the first place. For a full discussion of evidence-based school safety solutions, visit: everytownresearch.org/school-safety.

54%

In a 2022 survey of nearly 1,000 US teachers, 54 percent expressed the belief that allowing teachers to **carry firearms for school security would decrease overall safety**.⁶

Key Points

1. Teachers cannot and should not be expected to perform the job of trained law enforcement.

The notion of a “highly trained” teacher armed with a gun is a myth. Law enforcement officers across the country receive an average of 840 hours of basic training, including 168 hours of training on weapons, self-defense, and the use of force.⁸ In states that have laws aimed at arming school personnel, school staff receive significantly less training, in some of these states, no training at all.⁹

Even the most highly trained law enforcement officers in the country see their ability to shoot accurately decrease significantly in an active shooter situation.¹⁰ In a study of the Dallas Police Department from 2003 to 2017, only 54 percent of shots fired in an armed confrontation resulted in hits.¹¹ Similar findings were reported by the Metropolitan Police Department in Las Vegas, where hit rate accuracy with a suspect ranged from 23 percent to 52 percent between 2008 and 2015.¹² These odds are undoubtedly lower for a schoolteacher with far less training and experience, leaving everyone around them exposed to the potential for grievous harm. Further, arming staff members can lead to confusion for law enforcement upon arrival, including enormous risk for a armed staff.¹³

In states like Tennessee where arming teachers bills have passed, some major school districts have proactively rejected arming teachers and school staff.¹⁴ The Knox County Board of Education has asserted that law enforcement officers are better equipped to ensure school security and that introducing firearms poses significant safety risks and detracts from the learning environment.¹⁵

2. Asking teachers to potentially take the life of a current or former student is unrealistic.

An analysis of over five decades of active shooter incidents in K–12 schools found that in three in four of these incidents, the shooter or shooters were school-age and were current or former students.¹⁷

Aside from the technical ability of an armed teacher to shoot accurately under extreme conditions, legislators must confront a harsh reality regarding those who typically perpetrate school shootings: they are most likely to be current or former students. An Everytown analysis of the New York City Police Department’s report on active shooter incidents in K–12 schools over five decades found that in three in four of these incidents, the shooter or shooters were current or former students.¹⁸ Similarly, researchers found that in the six mass school shootings and 39 attempted mass school shootings in the two decades between 1999 and 2019, more than 9 in 10 shooters were current or former students at the school.¹⁹ Expecting teachers to take the life of a current or former student in such circumstances is both unrealistic and dangerous.

“One of the most candid conversations we have with school districts is: When an officer shows up and doesn’t know if you’re the good guy or the bad guy, he’s not gonna ask questions.”

— Kathy Martinez-Prather, director of the Texas School Safety Center¹⁶

3. Arming teachers jeopardizes trusting school environments, which are essential for ensuring school safety.

We have all seen in the aftermath of school shootings that students too often come forward to say they knew a student was in crisis and had access to firearms. Yet in so many cases, no adult was warned. Why? Several steps we are taking in the name of safety—including costly technology that creates a fortress-like environment and repeated drills—chip away at the nurturing, trusting climate needed both for productive learning and for students’ willingness to ask an adult for help and to report destructive thoughts and behaviors. Armed teachers further undermine this emotionally safe school climate.

A Secret Service study from 2008 to 2017 found that 100 percent of the perpetrators of school shootings exhibited concerning behaviors and that in 77 percent of cases, at least one person, most often a peer, was aware of their plan.²⁰ The introduction of guns into the classroom adds to the strain students currently feel in school, a product of a gun violence epidemic that has students experiencing media coverage of deadly shootings, as well as drills, swatting incidents, and lockdowns in their schools regularly. All of these actions together are contributing to young people’s diminished sense of safety and well-being today. Young people who ruminate about these scenarios, especially those who have previously been victimized, experience higher levels of posttraumatic stress.²¹ And, high school students with lower levels of school connectedness, related to positive relationships with teachers, are more likely to engage in violence with a weapon on school property.²² Students need a trusting and emotionally safe environment, not teachers carrying guns.

Anonymous tiplines are also an effective solution. In a study of the Sandy Hook Promise Say Something Anonymous Reporting System (SS-ARS), over half of firearm-related tips were classified as “life safety” events, necessitating an immediate response. The SS-ARS also identified tips related to interpersonal violence and suicide concerns, both of which can be relevant to firearm violence.²³ Without students’ participation fostered by their trust in the school, such systems become ineffective, putting students who need support, and the entire school community, at risk.

4. Arming teachers introduces new liability risks.

When several districts in Kansas sought to arm teachers, insurance companies informed them that they would not insure such a dangerous practice.²⁴ Further, school policies may expose teachers to criminal liability in the event policies are not consistent with state law. It is also unlikely that insurance companies would indemnify schools from monetary claims in these cases.

State immunity laws cannot exempt schools from all legal liability, particularly federal civil rights liability.

“The more guns that are coming into the equation, the more volatility and the more risk there is of somebody getting hurt.”

— J. Thomas Manger,
president of the
Major Cities Chiefs
Association²⁵

5. The multiple incidents of guns from armed staff being misplaced, fired inadvertently, or stolen from teachers remind us of the daily risk of bringing more guns into schools.

Both intentional and unintentional shootings, some perpetrated by armed nonsecurity personnel, have occurred:

- A maintenance department employee, who was approved to carry a concealed weapon on campus as part of the school guardian program, attempted to remove his sweater and his shoulder holster's velcro came off, causing his 9mm pistol to discharge near a student.²⁶
- A Spanish teacher who was fired then returned to school with an AK-47 in a guitar case and used it to kill the school headmaster and then himself.²⁷
- Faculty and staff have died by firearm suicides at schools.²⁸
- School resource officers, teachers, and other school staff have accidentally discharged their firearms in school.²⁹

Recommendations

The best way to protect American schools from mass shootings and gun violence is to adopt an evidence-based intervention plan like the one proposed by Everytown, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association.

Using what we know about school gun violence, our organizations have put together a plan that focuses on intervening before violence occurs.

1. Enact Sensible Gun Laws

The first part of this plan focuses on preventing shooters from getting their hands on guns by enacting sensible laws including:

Extreme Risk laws

Extreme Risk laws, sometimes called “Red Flag” laws, empower family members, law enforcement, and in some states, educators, to petition a judge to temporarily prevent a person from having access to guns when they pose a serious risk to themselves or others. These laws allow family members and law enforcement to act on warning signs of violence, which most active shooters exhibit before shootings at schools.

Secure gun storage laws

Secure storage and child-access prevention laws hold gun owners accountable if a child or, in some cases, another unauthorized person gains access to unsecured firearms. These laws, along with building public awareness of secure storage practices, can address the most common source of guns used in school gun violence.

Laws requiring background checks on all gun sales

Under current federal law, background checks are only required for sales from licensed gun dealers, but not for sales between unlicensed individuals. In states that do not require background checks on all gun sales, this gap allows minors and people who are prohibited from possessing firearms to buy guns with no questions asked. Requiring a background check on all gun sales is the foundation of any comprehensive gun violence prevention strategy.

Laws raising the age to purchase semiautomatic firearms to 21

Most active shooters at schools are school-aged.³⁰ Laws raising the age to purchase all semiautomatic firearms to 21, to match the age to purchase a handgun from a licensed gun dealer, can help prevent minors from easily obtaining assault weapons and other semiautomatic guns.

Laws prohibiting assault weapons and high-capacity magazines

Assault weapons are generally high-powered semi-automatic rifles specifically designed to allow shooters to wound and kill many people quickly. When combined with high-capacity magazines—commonly defined as magazines capable of holding more than 10 rounds of ammunition—a shooter is able to fire more rounds over a short period without pausing to reload. Prohibiting assault weapons and high-capacity magazines can prevent mass shooting injuries and deaths.

2. Protect Schools with Evidence-Based Actions

The second part of the plan focuses on evidence-based and expert-endorsed actions that schools can take to intervene and address warning signs of violence and keep shooters out of schools. Schools can do this by:

Establishing safe and equitable schools

Schools should strive to be “community schools,” schools that serve as neighborhood hubs that partner with community members to provide valuable services to the entire community.³¹ Schools should also promote effective partnerships between students and adults in order to keep schools safe and review school discipline practices and existing threat assessment programs to ensure they are not having a disproportionate impact on students of color.

Establishing school-based crisis intervention programs

Trauma-informed crisis intervention programs identify and manage potential threats of violence. These programs allow schools to intervene when a student is a risk to themselves or others.³² To effectively support vulnerable students, these initiatives require adequate funding for mental health services and resources.

Ensuring sufficient mental health counselors

Schools need to ensure that students have adequate access to mental health services, and legislatures need to fund adequate mental health professionals in schools.

Informing parents about secure gun storage

School districts can help prevent shootings by notifying families about the critical importance of secure firearms storage.³³ Public awareness campaigns like the [Be SMART program](#), developed by Everytown, educate the school community on secure gun storage.

Implementing basic security enhancements

Basic security measures that prevent unauthorized access to school buildings, grounds, and classrooms, including access-control measures and interior door locks, can prevent a shooter from accessing a school and give law enforcement time to respond.³⁴

Planning in advance for emergencies

Effective emergency planning, which facilitates communication between all community stakeholders, can empower staff to immediately lock down schools and allow law enforcement to respond quickly.³⁵ Emergency planning must be trauma-informed and schools should reconsider the use of active shooter drills to prevent lasting harm to students and staff.³⁶

For more information about evidence-based school safety solutions, visit: everytownresearch.org/school-safety

For citations in this report, please visit: everytownresearch.org/arming-teachers-introduces-new-risks-into-schools.

Everytown Research & Policy is a program of Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, an independent, non-partisan organization dedicated to understanding and reducing gun violence. Everytown Research & Policy works to do so by conducting methodologically rigorous research, supporting evidence-based policies, and communicating this knowledge to the American public.

