

A Pair of Retired Military Officers Makes a Case Against Arming Teachers



By Evie Blad — September 12, 2022

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Clark Aposhian, president of Utah Shooting Sport Council, holds a pistol during concealed weapons training for 200 Utah teachers, in West Valley City, Utah. Rick Bowmer/AP

It's not possible for teachers to maintain adequate training to safely carry firearms in schools, a pair of retired military officers said Monday. And policies that promote arming educators distract from needed school safety solutions, they said.

States should reject a push by some politicians to arm teachers instead of considering new gun restrictions, they said in a press call organized by the American Federation of Teachers .

“It is not a good idea to try to do two things at once: to teach your class while you are looking over your shoulder, while you are getting prepared to use a weapon,” said Paul Eaton, a retired Army major general who led operations to train troops for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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Eaton spoke to reporters along with Rob Ferguson, a retired lieutenant colonel for the U.S. Marine Corps who now teaches Junior ROTC. They were joined by AFT President Randi Weingarten.

In the months since the May 24 school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, where 19 students and two teachers died, conservative lawmakers around the country have floated the idea of increasing the number of adults who carry weapons in schools, and some have suggested training teachers to do so.

Supporters of such proposals say they could serve as a deterrent or help stop shooters when law enforcement cannot respond in time. But opponents, including law enforcement officials and teachers unions, say arming educators would put them in difficult situations and possibly make students less safe.

In June, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican, signed a bill that would reduce training requirements for teachers to be armed at school to 24 hours—far less than the 700 hours of training required for law enforcement in the state.

Other states have a variety of policies on armed educators. Texas, for example, allows screened educators to train as “school marshals” who carry concealed weapons in schools. Florida passed a law after the 2018 school shooting in Parkland that requires an armed adult in every school—either a law enforcement officer or a trained, non-instructional staff member.

Supporters of such proposals say they could serve as a deterrent or help stop shooters when law enforcement cannot respond in time. But opponents, including teachers unions and some law enforcement officials, say arming educators could backfire and possibly make students less safe.

The AFT and the retired military officers who spoke to reporters Monday said they want states to reconsider such plans. In states that authorize armed educators, they want school districts to decline the option. And, as the country heads into the midterm elections, they warned about political talking points becoming policy.

Opinion remains split on the issue

Eaton, who has supported several Democratic political campaigns, said policymakers should focus on securing buildings and increasing the presence of trained law enforcement, rather than authorizing teachers to carry weapons.

Firearms training must be thorough and ongoing to be effective, Eaton said. When he was serving in Somalia, in 1992, senior military officials had to ensure their weapons were empty before entering special secured areas by firing into a barrel of sand, Eaton said. And even those trained officials would occasionally hear the sound of a discharge during those tests, he said.

“And that’s with military who have been training with weapons all of their life,” Eaton said, adding that educators would likely be far less prepared.

Ferguson, the retired Marine, said it is very difficult to properly aim a firearm, raising concerns about training and about liability in the event a student is injured.

Some school employees and educators do wish to be armed, calling it an unfortunate necessity. In July, The New York Times profiled an Ohio teacher who said she took weapons training because she felt “helpless.” Education Week has also covered comments from school officials and educators who support carrying weapons in schools.

But some educators who’ve survived school shootings have pushed back against those proposals. In 2017, Education Week spoke to a group of survivors who have organized against the notion of educators carrying guns.

In a June survey of 1,005 American adults by PDK International, 45 percent of respondents said they would “somewhat support” or “strongly support” arming teachers as a school security measure. Eighty percent said they would somewhat or strongly support armed police in schools.



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