Lawmakers Debate Whether or Not Schoolteachers Should Be Armed

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.26.18

In the aftermath of yet another mass school shooting, there are deep divisions about whether teacher should be armed.

Lawmakers in several states are wrestling with the contentious idea. One of those states is Florida, where residents continue to mourn the loss of 17 lives at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland.

President Trump is in favor of arming teachers. During a listening session Wednesday with parents and survivors of school shootings, he said that a teacher adept at firearms “could very well end the attack very quickly.”

Randi Weingarten, the president of the 1.7 million-member American Federation of Teachers, called arming teachers a horrible idea. She said an educator’s handgun would be no match for the assault-style weapons often wielded by attackers. “The solution is to ban these military weapons from people who shouldn’t have them,” Weingarten said.

Several States Discuss Idea of Arming Teachers

The National Association of School Resource Officers, which provides training to school-based law enforcement officers, said it opposes arming teachers. “Anyone who hasn’t received the extensive training provided to law enforcement officers will likely be mentally unprepared to take a life, especially the life of a student assailant,” it said in a statement Thursday.

Wayne LaPierre, vice president and CEO of the National Rifle Association, said Thursday that reactions like Weingarten’s are expected after mass shootings. The National Rifle Association, or NRA, typically fights against laws that would restrict gun use.

“The whole idea from some of our opponents that armed security makes us less safe is completely ridiculous,” he told a conference of conservatives in Washington.

“It should not be easier for a madman to shoot up a school than a bank or a jewelry store,” LaPierre said.

In Florida, Republican state Senator Greg Steube has proposed allowing specially trained educators with military or law enforcement backgrounds to be armed. Similar discussions have taken place in Kentucky, Colorado, North Carolina and Alabama in recent days. In Wisconsin, the attorney general said he’s open to the idea.

The General Public Weighs In

“Our students do not need to be sitting ducks. Our teachers do not need to be defending themselves with a No. 2 pencil,” said Alabama state Representative Will Ainsworth in proposing a bill days after the Valentine’s Day shooting in Florida.

In contrast, a California law that took effect January 1 halted the ability of school districts to allow non-security employees to carry guns on campus.

The general public is also weighing the idea. A poll released this week by ABC News/Washington Post says 42 percent of Americans believe teachers with guns could have prevented the Florida shooting.
“I’m not here to tell all teachers that they have to carry a gun,” said Kasey Hansen, a Utah teacher from Salt Lake City. She said she got the idea to arm herself after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 children and six adults died.

“It just really hit home that these teachers, all they could do was pile those kids in a corner and stand in front of them and hope for the best,” she said. “For me personally, I felt that it was more of a solution than just hiding in a corner and waiting.”

Some Teachers Are Comfortable with Guns

In 2014, a Utah teacher who was carrying a concealed firearm accidentally dropped her weapon in an elementary school bathroom and it fired. The teacher was injured when the bullet struck a toilet and caused it to explode. No faculty or students were around, but the teacher resigned from her job and was charged with misdemeanor. She paid a fine and took a firearm-safety class as part of a plea deal.

Tara Bordeaux, a teacher in Austin, Texas is comfortable with guns, but she wonders whether she could pull the trigger on a students, even one who is armed.

“Would I get the same training and would I have the same type of instinct of when and how to use it?” asked Bordeaux, her state’s 2018 teacher of the year. “I don’t have any instincts in me to be an officer of the law. My instincts are to be a teacher.”

At least eight states allow, or don’t specifically prohibit, concealed weapons in K-12 schools, according to the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

Brock Cartwright is the superintendent in Claude, Texas. He won’t reveal how many or who among his teachers is armed, but the district’s message to potential intruders blares in capital letters in three signs: “Please be aware that the staff at Claude ISD is armed and my use whatever force necessary to protect our students.”

Parents Have Differing Opinions

Like other administrators, Cartwright said armed teachers are just one part of safety plans that include drilling for emergencies and shoring up buildings. The small town east of Amarillo doesn’t have a police department, raising concerns about the potential response time for law enforcement.

“Hopefully, we never have to use it,” Cartwright said, “but if we do, our thought is we’re going to hold off until help arrives.”

When asked by radio host Hugh Hewitt about arming teachers, the U.S. education secretary, Betsy DeVos, said states “clearly have the opportunity and the option to do that.”

Robert Morphew, a parent from Magnolia, Texas, supports teachers having guns in his son’s high school. He would want strict guidelines for teachers that are armed.

“I do think it would be a deterrent, there’s no doubt,” he said.

In Buffalo, New York, parent Wendy Diina disagreed.

“Why am I trying to prevent someone from having a gun by giving a gun to someone else?” the mother of two asked.