

To the Members of the Government Oversight and Reform Committee:

My name is Christa Overbeck, and I am both a high school English teacher in a large suburban public high school outside Columbus and a member of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. I am writing today with regard to HB 317.

It boggles my mind to think that we can be staring down one of the most harrowing starts a school year in recent memory as we battle the twin plagues of COVID-19 and racism, and that the gun lobby is now pushing dangerous legislation in Ohio that would drastically reduce safety training requirements for teachers who carry loaded handguns inside elementary, middle and high schools. Never has the teaching environment been so fraught and never has there been a more tenuous time to talk about arming teachings—let alone doing so with the minimal training proposed by the bill.

Indeed, I have deep reservations about arming teachings under any circumstances. A teacher's primary responsibility is to nurture children, and facilitate their cognitive, socio-emotional development. Indeed, I have long said that the day districts arm teachers is the day I stop teaching. As I prepare to enter the classroom next week in the midst of a dangerous pandemic, it is, I should think evident, that I am prepared to take a certain amount of risk in the service of my students. There is not a single teacher in the years since Columbine who has not entered the classroom with an understanding that they might need to protect their students with their own lives. And yet, while there are those who might argue that arming teachings furthers our mission to protect, I would counter that militarizing educators undermines everything we are tasked with doing; it changes the power dynamic in the classroom and in the building in destructive ways. Education needs to look less like policing, not more. My strength as an educator lies in my ability to connect with my students, to show empathy and compassion, to show them the power that arises in them when they learn how to piece the world together in their intellect. While an armed teacher might on one day in a million serve a purpose, an armed teacher will undermine their most authentic mission on the thousands of other days when the work is merely human.

And while, it might be said, that the choice is mine to carry a gun at school or not, I do not wish to work in a building with colleagues who may be carrying firearms and with who knows what level of training. I do not want my child to go to school in a place where his teacher might also be carrying a gun. We cannot begin to anticipate the kinds of dangerous situations this kind of cavalier act will set up. If a trained police officer can make questionable, fear-provoked decisions with a firearm, what of an under trained teacher? How could arming teachers not end in preventable tragedy? Let us not blur that line of what an educator is tasked with doing with overzealous and half-considered efforts to put guns—rather than books or ideas or equations or experiments—in their hands.

Our primary goal should be in keeping guns OUT of schools regardless of who is carrying them. No classroom with a gun inside it can be truly safe. Lawmakers should put the safety of their constituents and the primary purpose of education first and reject SB 317.

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