

Testimony on Senate Bill 317
Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee
August 30, 2020

Submitted by:
Lisa Voigt

Chair Coley, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to present this testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 317. My name is Lisa Voigt and I am a professor at The Ohio State University and the mother of public high school student. I began following Ohio's gun legislation over three years ago, after the passage of a bill in December 2016 permitting universities to allow guns on campus. An experience with a student who I later found out had impulsively purchased a handgun led me to think a great deal about the risks associated with guns in classrooms, whether in the hands of students or teachers, and the impact of laws and policies on those risks. What is striking about SB 317 is that it is not a bill designed to lessen those risks or to keep children safer from gun violence in schools, despite the good intentions of the members of this committee. Experience and research clearly show that arming teachers puts students at greater risk and does nothing to stop active shooters or other forms of school gun violence.¹ Public opinion recognizes this fact, as you can see in the overwhelming opposition to this bill (over 110 testimonies were submitted in opposition in the July 21 hearing alone) and in opinion polls of teachers, students, and parents.² This overwhelming opposition is in stark contrast to the proponent testimony on this bill, which was limited to two lobbyists from the NRA and Buckeye Firearms. Notably, their testimony did not offer a single piece of evidence or statistic supporting the advisability of arming teachers or school staff, let alone allowing them to be armed without adequate levels of training. This imbalance alone should lead the committee should reject SB 317.

What the two proponent testimonies of the bill did was to focus on the narrower purpose of the bill, which is to intervene in a judicial process, as explicitly stated at the end of the bill: to overrule an appeals court decision in the case of Gabbard vs. Madison Local School District.³ Ohio voters expect their legislators to introduce and pass bills in order to solve problems, and it seems that this is the problem that SB 317 seeks to solve. The representative of Buckeye Firearms—the organization that provided the training at the heart of the court case—stated that this bill would put the decision to exempt teachers from training requirements (those mandated by Ohio Revised Code 109.78) “in the hands of the local school district and those who would volunteer” to be exempted from those requirements (Sexton).⁴ Putting the decision in the hands of “those who would volunteer” is not, I would hope, the intention of this committee.

With respect to the argument that the decision about exemptions from training requirements should be in the hands of the local school board, I hope you will evaluate it in two ways. One is to consider it in light of the Ohio Constitution's mandate that the General Assembly “shall make such provisions” to “secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state” (Article VI, section 2). Another is to consider the actual experience of the parents and

students of the Madison Local School District—the experience that led to the introduction of this bill. Did the members of the school board act in a responsible way that demonstrates that they deserve to be entrusted with the decision to arm teachers and exempt them from training requirements? If you listened to the testimony of students and parents from that school district in the July 21 hearing, the answer is clearly no.

In that hearing, you learned that the school board members, none of whom have particular expertise in the area, had done no research before deciding to arm teachers (Adams). You learned that the school board made the decision with “virtually no advance notice or communication with the Madison community,” including the teachers (B. Ison). You learned about the dangerous inadequacy and disturbing content of the training program used by the district and others in Ohio, Buckeye Firearms’ FASTER training (Adams). This training uses religious and ethnic stereotypes, misinterprets an Arabic expression of faith, and presents gratuitous examples of terrorist violence in foreign countries in order to teach trainees to view Muslim and Arab students as threats that they should be prepared to kill (Hameed). You learned that participants in the program get as little as 10 minutes of live fire training, according to the testimony of one armed staff member (Adams). You learned that one volunteer participant failed their shooting test twice, and was allowed to take it a third time (Griffis). You learned that there was no evaluation or oversight of the mental health of the armed teachers (Griffis). You learned that the Madison school board has mocked, silenced, ignored, and doxxed or threatened parents and members of the community who asked questions or raised concerns about the policy and training (S. Ison, B. Ison). Finally, you were reminded that replacing the elected members of a school board through the ballot box is a long-term process that would take six years or more, indicating that accountability to voters is not sufficient protection from the enactment of dangerous policies and practices involving armed personnel in schools (B. Ison). In sum, you were presented with overwhelming evidence showing exactly why the decision about exempting individuals from the training required by ORC 109.78 *cannot* be entrusted to local school boards.

The appeals court decision in the Gabbard v. Madison case is not a problem that this committee should be spending its time trying to “solve.” While a large body of research suggests that *no* law should “exempt [*anyone*] from training if allowed to go armed in [a] school safety zone” (to invoke the title of this bill), the specific example of the Madison Local School District demonstrates why leaving those decisions and exemptions in the hands of local school boards is dangerous and irresponsible. I hope that you will oppose SB 317 and instead address the real problems and risks currently being faced by Ohio’s schoolchildren, teachers, and parents.

Respectfully submitted,

Lisa Voigt

¹ See for example <https://everytownresearch.org/report/a-plan-for-preventing-mass-shootings-and-ending-all-gun-violence-in-american-schools/#arming-teachers-is-dangerous>; <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/wp->

[content/uploads/2019/02/The-Truth-About-School-Shootings-Report.pdf](#);
https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/gun_violence/policy/19M106A/.

² See for example https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/survey-finds-wide-opposition-among-parents-to-arming-teachers/2018/07/16/03674e34-8927-11e8-8aea-86e88ae760d8_story.html;
<https://teachplus.org/news-events/press-release/teachers-overwhelmingly-oppose-idea-arming-teachers-schools-new-national>.

³ “The General Assembly hereby declares that the purpose of this act is to expressly overrule the decision of the Twelfth District Court of Appeals in the case Gabbard v. Madison Local School Dist. Bd. of Educ., 12th Dist. Butler No. CA2019-03-051, 2020-Ohio-1180” (p. 5 lines 135-19).

⁴ The referenced testimonies can be found on <http://www.ohiosenate.gov/committees/government-oversight-and-reform/document-archive>.