

Ben Adams HB 99 Testimony
House Criminal Justice Committee
April 15, 2021

My name is Ben Adams, I am an Ohioan born and raised, I am a lifelong resident of Butler County, and I am a father of five children who attend school in the Madison Local School District, including one who just graduated from the Junior/Senior High School. I am also one of the plaintiffs in the *Gabbard v. Madison Local School District* lawsuit mentioned in HB 99, and I oppose this dangerous bill. I want to emphasize that I am not opposed to guns in general. I am a gun owner myself. I am opposed to the dangerous lack of training for armed teachers who carry guns around my children and their classmates.

For First Responders, Training is a Matter of Life or Death

As a firefighter and paramedic for the last 17 years in southwest Ohio, I am keenly aware of the crucial role of training in preparing first responders like me to respond to and function effectively in a high-stress environment. To qualify as a Level II Firefighter, for example, I completed 240 hours of fire training with an additional 1800 hours for paramedic certification. In my department, we train every single day, because it is the only way to ensure that we can properly execute lifesaving skills when the moment arrives.

One such moment was in February 2016, when I responded to an active shooting incident at my children's school – the Madison Junior/Senior High School. I was off-duty, but responded from my house and treated patients at the scene alongside my wife, who is a nurse practitioner. It was a chaotic scene, as you can imagine, but our training is what enabled us to react calmly, effectively, and safely. Thankfully, no one was killed.

HB 99 puts my children and their classmates in danger by allowing their teachers to carry guns into the classroom with less training than a little league umpire. It is less training than you need to become a manicurist in Ohio. It is less training than the bus driver needs, who takes kids in the Madison Local School District to school every day. That is deeply irresponsible and wrong. Someone with so little training should not be trusted to carry firearms all day, every day in our children's schools.

HB 99 Lets School Boards Ignore Training Altogether

Proponents claim that HB 99 merely enables local control of training for armed staff. In reality though, it is a license for school boards to set breathtakingly low standards for training—if they require any at all. We don't need to imagine this; it is already happening in school districts in Ohio that do not think they have to follow the existing standards. In the Madison Local School

District where my children go, the board selected a training course called “FASTER” that is run by the Buckeye Firearms Foundation, is only three days long, and is dangerously inadequate. It is less training than is required to be a little league umpire.

Madison’s armed staff members described FASTER during sworn testimony in our lawsuit, and admitted that they each got just a single turn being the armed responder during roleplays to practice a simulated active shooter response. And that was roleplay done with fake guns. Their chance to use real firearms during a practice response **amounted to only 10 minutes in a “shoot house;”** the rest of the time they spent shooting stationary targets at a range. In my line of work, if you are responding to an emergency and trying to perform a task that you have practiced just once before, someone is going to get hurt or killed.

Worse, without state oversight some school districts are arming staff that can’t even pass the low standards of an unregulated private program like FASTER. One of Madison’s armed staff members failed FASTER’s shooting qualification test twice. Unlike a police recruit taking OPOTA training, Madison’s employee was allowed to retake the test over and over until he finally passed—on the third try. And he’s not the only one like this: Vice News recently reported on a fifth grade Science and English teacher in Ohio who took FASTER’s three-day course but then failed the shooting test. Her school allowed her to carry a gun anyway, because “her school doesn’t follow FASTER’s standard. By her school’s standard, Angie shot well enough to join the team of armed staff.”¹ Under HB 99, there is nothing stopping Ohio school districts from skipping armed staff training altogether.

HB 99 Lets School Boards Arm Teachers in Secret to Avoid Accountability

Proponents of HB 99 claim that if parents don’t like a school board’s decision about arming staff, or about how much training they get, they can hold the board accountable. But how is that supposed to happen when many school districts—including my own—conceal key details about how armed school staff are being trained and vetted? Some school districts don’t even tell parents or the public that they have an armed staff program in the first place.²

In Madison, our school board refused to say whether or how armed staff would be trained, and we obtained this information only through a lawsuit. At one point, I spoke to one of Madison’s school board members and he told me that the Board should never have told parents about the program in the first place, and wasn’t required to.

¹ See <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/armed-part-2-the-good-guys/id1525769448?i=1000499350691>.

² See https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/armed-and-safe-at-ohio-schools-the-security-plan-includes-teachers-and-guns/2018/03/12/9f49ff68-1b22-11e8-ac5a-16e60e4605f3_story.html

In another Ohio school district, parents didn't find out about an armed staff program until a child was nearly shot. In the spring of 2019 at the Highland Elementary School in South Bloomfield Township, two first-grade students found—and were playing with—a loaded gun belonging to someone in the district's armed staff program. Parents had no idea that the school had even authorized its staff to carry guns: the district was arming its staff under a secret policy hidden from the public. Then on top of this, the district tried to hide this near-fatal incident from the public.³

How are parents in Highland Elementary, or Madison, or any of the other districts with secret armed staff programs supposed to make sure that our children are safe when the school district won't tell us whether it is arming their teachers, or giving them any training? We cannot wait for a gun to go off to discover that our school district has armed the wrong person, or failed to give them proper training. But HB 99 forces parents to do just that.

In my professional life, as in my personal life, I am motivated by a desire to protect and ensure the safety of my children and our community. That was my reason for joining the lawsuit in Madison about the dangerously inadequate training for our school's armed staff. As a parent with five children, I know that I am responsible for their safety and wellbeing under my roof. When I hand that responsibility off to the teachers and staff of the Madison Junior/Senior High School each morning, I want to know that they are not going to cut corners with my children's safety. This body should guarantee that my kids and every kid in Ohio can go to a school where any armed staff are adequately trained so that they are safe from dangerous and deadly accidents. HB 99 does the exact opposite, and for that reason I ask you to oppose this dangerous bill.

³ See <https://www.timesreporter.com/news/20190816/first-graders-had-access-to-gun-meant-to-prevent-school-violence/1>