

Erin Gabbard HB 99 Testimony
House Committee on Primary and Secondary Education
April 15, 2021

Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and other members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for considering my testimony. My name is Erin Gabbard. I am the proud mother of two children in the Madison Local School District. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and I offer them in opposition to HB99.

HB99's proposed modifications to Revised Code section 109.78 would authorize local school boards to allow school employees to carry loaded firearms on school grounds only minimal training. This does not protect our children, it endangers them.

We don't have to imagine how local school districts might abuse this authority; we can look to the Madison Local School Board's actions in April of 2018. I'm proud to be a Madison parent. I love the school; I love the teachers and the staff. But over these past two years, I've also felt deeply concerned about the district's plans to arm teachers and other staff members in our school. And I've felt frustrated by how they chose to do it without transparency.

The school board passed a resolution to allow teachers to be armed while on duty with only 24 hours of training. They paid for staff to complete the FASTER program which only included 10 minutes of scenario training with the actual weapons that they would be carrying. As just one example of how inadequate the oversight was for this program, one of the armed staff members was allowed to carry a weapon into the school after failing the shooting accuracy test twice, before finally passing on the third attempt. We asked for the mental health evaluations of the armed staff, with their names redacted to protect individual privacy, so that we could make sure our Board was only authorizing appropriate staff to go armed. The mental health evaluations of police officers are public record. The Board fought us tooth and nail in court and we have never seen them. I fear what our Board is hiding.

Some people have suggested that parents who are worried about armed gunmen watching their children at school should just "vote with their feet" by moving somewhere else. However, Madison, like many school districts, keeps key details of their armed staff program secret from parents. I know this, because I asked the Madison school board repeatedly how they intended to screen, train, and supervise our district's armed staff, and they refused to answer these simple questions. It wasn't until our lawsuit went into the discovery phase that we learned just how little training armed staff in our district were getting. Most school districts don't even tell parents that they're arming teachers to begin with. How can parents "vote with their feet" when they aren't even told what is going on?

In addition, the dangers that armed staff—especially those with inadequate training—pose to students and staff are well-documented. As of March of this year, there have been over 90 reported incidents of guns being mishandled at schools. These incidents include employees leaving their firearms unattended and accessible to students, unintentionally discharging their firearms, and using the threat of a firearm to discipline students.

I want safe and common-sense solutions for protecting our children in school. I want to believe that we all want that. I have tried to understand why anyone would consider a bill with as little as eight hours of training for armed staff and keep coming back to the same questions...who does this bill protect? Who does this bill serve? Why can't we guarantee to all Ohio's children, rural or urban, that anyone carrying a gun in school has enough training to keep them safe.

HB99 doesn't protect our children and our teachers. It puts them at additional risk. You don't need to take my word for it -- just ask the Ohio Education Association and the Ohio Federation of Teachers—they recently filed a brief in support of the parents in the lawsuit against Madison Local School district. So did more than 250 Ohio teachers. So did the Ohio Fraternal Order of Police, and a group of firearms training experts including the Dayton Police Chief and the Commander of the Columbus Division of Police Training Bureau. They all asked the Court to uphold rigorous state-sanctioned training for armed staff and warned of the dangers if school boards are given free rein to ignore these requirements, and arm staff with little or no training.

Let me put it more plainly -- the first sentence of the Ohio Statehouse Security FAQs states that "...with the exception of those carried by peace officers in the course of their duties and as expressly authorized under division (N) of section 105.41 of the Revised Code, **firearms or other weapons, concealed or otherwise, are prohibited within the capitol building...**" You are putting our children at risk, risks that you as lawmakers will not even take.

I often think about the shooting that occurred in our school in 2016. It happened during lunchtime in a full cafeteria. Children were screaming and running everywhere. There was pandemonium. Do we really expect a teacher with as little as eight hours of training (six of which can be completed online) to be able to use their weapon in a way that doesn't harm the students it proclaims to protect, as they run for their lives in and out of sightlines? If our staff members had been armed in 2016, how much more blood would've been shed because of lack of training? Are you willing to take the same risks you're asking our children to take?

Who does this bill protect? Who does this bill serve? Please ask yourself these questions, and please answer honestly.

If you are a proponent of keeping our children safe in our schools, you must develop comprehensive legislation that requires annual rigorous training and testing that include de-escalation tactics, psychological evaluations, and routine independent assessments for armed staff. **All we're asking is for you to protect our children the same way you protect yourselves.** This bill does none of that. This bill is not about protecting our children. If you are concerned with the safety of our students in Ohio schools, you must vote no on this bill.