

Testimony on House Bill 99
House Criminal Justice Committee
April 15, 2021

Submitted by:
Lisa Voigt

Chair LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to present this testimony in opposition to House Bill 99. My name is Lisa Voigt and I am a professor at The Ohio State University and the mother of a public high school student in Columbus.

As you will undoubtedly hear and read in many opposition testimonies, both experience and research 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 we saw in the overwhelming opposition to this bill in the last legislative session, when over 250 testimonies were submitted against the bill; this strong opposition is confirmed in opinion polls of teachers, students, and parents.² There have been only three proponent testimonies on HB 99—just one more than last session’s version, although one of these (David Spicer’s oral testimony) did not offer support for the 8-hour training provision in this bill, but instead quite clearly indicated that 8 hours was inadequate. None of the proponent testimonies offered 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 HB 99.

But as I learned while following the previous version of this bill in the last General Assembly (SB 317), another reason to reject HB 99 lies in what we learned through the judicial process that it was meant to intervene in (the appeals court decision in the case of Gabbard vs. Madison Local School District). HB 99, like the previous version, seeks to give school boards the authority to exempt any individuals they want from the training requirements mandated by Ohio Revised Code 109.78 for armed personnel in schools. The exemption in SB 317 was total, meaning that such exempted individuals would have no training requirements at all; HB 99 stipulates that the authorized personnel must “successfully complete firearms training that meets or exceeds the training requirements for a concealed handgun licensee.” I am glad that the HB 99 sponsors recognized the folly of *entirely* untrained individuals with loaded guns around children. But I’d like to point out what else that change acknowledges: the authority and responsibility that you hold in the General Assembly, according to the Ohio Constitution, to “secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state” (Article VI, section 2). This responsibility necessarily limits the degree of “local control” that school boards can exercise, and we see many manifestations of this authority and responsibility in statewide testing requirements, teacher training requirements, etc.

What the case of Gabbard vs. Madison Local School District, a case brought by 5 different parents of 12 schoolchildren in this district, allows us to observe is what happens when a school

board claims that authority to exempt anyone they wish from current law (the training requirements mandated by ORC 109.78) to carry firearms in schools. The parents brought the lawsuit when the school board declined to provide information about its armed staff policy and its plan to manage risks associated with arming staff. This is information that should certainly be provided to parents, given the risks to their children outlined above, and yet this bill would permit every school board in Ohio to withhold such information from parents. The committee that considered the bill last session heard quite a bit about the experience of parents in this district leading to the lawsuit. The appropriate question to ask when considering HB 99 is, when we look closely at a school board that chose to grant those exemptions from training requirements, *did they act in a responsible way that demonstrates that school boards deserve to be entrusted with the decision to exempt armed teachers and staff from training requirements?* The students and parents from that school district, who testified in the previous General Assembly, demonstrated very clearly that the answer is no. Let me summarize some of the testimony that I heard and that you can easily find on the 133rd General Assembly website, if it is not provided again in today's hearing.³

These witnesses testified that the school board members, none of whom have particular expertise in the area, had done *no* research before deciding to arm teachers (Adams); that the school board made the decision with "virtually no advance notice or communication with the Madison community," including the teachers (B. Ison); and that the training program used by the district and others in Ohio, Buckeye Firearms' FASTER training, is inadequate and dangerous (Adams). This training, we learned, 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). They testified 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). They testified that one volunteer participant failed their shooting test twice and was allowed to take it a third time (Griffis). They testified that there was *no* evaluation or oversight of the mental health of the armed teachers (Griffis). They testified that the Madison school board 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, they testified 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, that testimony provided 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.

Do we have any other evidence of the danger that such practices by school boards have already posed to the children of Ohio? Unfortunately, we do. In August 2019, a staff member authorized by the Highland Local School Board in Morrow County left her pistol unlocked near her desk when she left to go to the restroom, while two first graders were in her office. The children found it and one pointed it at the other. This armed staff member had received 28 hours of training—substantially more than the minimum you are considering.⁴

Even when they are carried by well-meaning individuals, guns introduce unacceptable risks into schools, like the ones faced by those children in Highland Elementary School, and like the ones that the parents of Madison Local Schools had to sue to find out about. Gutting the training requirements for those individuals, as this bill seeks to do, is even more dangerous. For the safety of Ohio's schoolchildren and all of those who teach and care for them in our schools, please oppose HB99.

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 <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/legislation-committee-documents?id=GA133-SB-317>

⁴ <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20190816/first-graders-had-access-to-gun-meant-to-prevent-school-violence>.

You can find numerous other incidents of mishandled guns in schools here:

<https://giffords.org/lawcenter/report/every-incident-of-mishandled-guns-in-schools/>