

Good afternoon. I want to extend a sincere thank you to the Chairman, Vice Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, for allowing me to speak today with regards to the legislative changes being proposed in House Bill 206. My name is Amy DeRodes and I am a high school band and choir director from a small rural community in Northwest Ohio and I am currently in my twelfth year of teaching there. This past summer I was blessed to find out that I had been nominated as one of the Ohio Teachers of the Year and as such I represent District 1. It has been one of the greatest honors of my professional life. But that is not why I've come before you today. Today, I am here because of something that happened last year, which turned out to be one of the *worst* days of my professional life as an educator. That was the day that a student, a fourteen year old student, brought a loaded gun into our school.

I'm sure that many of you can relate to having a monumental experience, be it good or bad, that lives in infamy in your mind. That is how that day was for me. I'll never forget what I was doing, what class I was teaching, and how people responded when they heard what happened. After school teachers were visibly shaken. I remember seeing staff crying as they lived through moments of panic and anxiety for what *might* have been, while others sat in silence. Learning that a loaded weapon had been carried throughout our building for the better part of the day, was frightening. And though no one was physically hurt, the emotional toll it took on the students and staff is still being felt to this day. At the end of the year, teachers left our district to go and teach elsewhere. We witnessed educators, really excellent educators, accomplished educators, leave the profession altogether. Families chose to enroll their kids at neighboring schools in order to find a place where they felt their children would be safer. When a situation like this happens in a district, the impact is felt in many ways. For us, the fallout of that one event was like a crater hitting the side of a mountain.

I wondered how our district would handle the situation and honestly just assumed that the student would be removed from the school and never able to come back. I soon learned that based on our current legislation, a fourteen year old can only be expelled for a certain number of days. To clarify, that would mean the possibility of a return during the *next* school year. *This* school year to be exact. So now, I'm here asking *you* to give the power to protect our schools back to the principals and superintendents. In education we deal in restorative discipline, working daily to help students understand what they can do to repair a wrong in order to move forward. But some choices cannot and should not be remedied in that way. Students and district staff have the right to feel safe in their environment. They have the right to come to school every day without fear. Districts must have the power to use their professional judgment to extend additional discipline and expulsion days to students who invoke fear and show the potential for extreme violence in their school community.

As educators we know that we are not immune to horrific acts of violence in our schools. But actions have consequences. The real world will task our children with consequences for their behavior, and their choices. Not only are we doing a disservice for *those* children who break the rules, but for every one of the students following the rules as well. What example are we setting for *them*? How will we protect *them*, and who is liable if something happens to *them*? Who is responsible when a student who has demonstrated a willingness to commit an act of violence is allowed to return to school and violence ensues again? When do the rights of the students who follow the rules and who make the right choices, supersede the rights of the one who breaks the law? Who is responsible when the “NEXT to worst thing” that could happen in a school becomes the WORST thing that could happen in a school? These questions are why colleagues of mine walked out the door at the end of last year and never returned. Our students have the right to feel safe. Our staff has the right to feel safe. It’s just that simple.

As I mentioned, I am a band and choir director, but I am also the musical director at my school. Several months before the incident we performed a show called, *Into The Woods*. I was reminded of the words to one of the songs called “Children Will Listen” and I want to share them here with you.

*Careful the things you say  
Children will listen  
Careful the things you do  
Children will see and learn  
Children may not obey  
But, children will listen  
Children will look to you  
For which way to turn  
To learn what to be  
Careful before you say  
"Listen to me"  
Children will listen*

Our children are listening. What will they hear from us at this moment? How will they perceive our actions? How will we as a body of people who care about education be better tomorrow than we are today? How will you protect the rights of the students, staff, and teachers in school districts across Ohio who need for this bill to be changed? What can you do today to make our children safer tomorrow? Thank you for your consideration and for taking the time to allow me to speak on behalf of children and teachers.