

Emily Tobey HB 99 Testimony  
House Criminal Justice Committee  
*April 15, 2021*

My name is Emily Tobey, and I grew up in southwest Ohio and live in Butler County. I would like to address you from the perspective of a longtime Ohio educator and parent. I am intimately familiar with teaching in Ohio; I have taught in middle grades, high school, and most recently at the university level. I have three children in Ohio schools: one in elementary school, one in middle school, and one in high school. My husband Ben is a plaintiff in the *Gabbard v. Madison Local School District* lawsuit that HB 99 mentions by name.

I grew up in a family with a generational history of law enforcement and military service. I grew up seeing my grandfathers, uncles, and cousins shoot guns off the porch into the back hill to celebrate New Year's. My father taught me to target shoot, as a kid. We were never afraid of guns in my house, but I learned the importance of treating them with appropriate care and respect—that they are not toys, that they should be properly secured, and that they should be used only by people with proper instruction and training.

Madison Local School District is currently at the center of the discussion about arming teachers in Ohio. I know it well. I graduated from Madison High School in 1999. After many years away pursuing our college degrees, my husband and I came back to Butler County to raise a family, to have our kids be the fourth generation to live in the house I grew up in. We dreamed that they would be shaped by a safe, slowed-down environment like the one I remember as a kid.

We had no way of anticipating Madison's decision to arm teachers, which happened during the first school year after our return home. I spoke at several school board meetings, expressing my concern and asking about training and mental health screening for the armed staff, because—like all parents—we wanted to make an informed choice about our children's safety. We weren't asking for the names of armed teachers, or for details of the school's security plan, or anything like that. We simply wanted to know that the administration was making sound, evidence-based choices, that they were properly vetting and training armed staff, and they had appropriate policies for safely securing weapons in our children's school environment.

Unfortunately, like many school districts, the administration in Madison stonewalled parents. We only learned about the district's plan for minimal training and for mental health screening by filing a lawsuit—and there are still important details about the process that the school district won't share with parents. This inflexibility and lack of transparency on the part of Madison's administration led my family to the difficult decision of moving to a different district. Leaving our family home was an awful choice to have to make, but it was the only way we could be sure that our children had a safe learning environment. It pains me to think that some districts do not even disclose to parents that they are arming teachers, so other parents do not even get the choice that I had.

I know firsthand how difficult it is to manage a classroom, and how serious safety threats can emerge in the blink of an eye. I have personally faced an aggressive student who turned a

pair of classroom scissors into a weapon, and who had to be talked down. If there were a firearm in this classroom, how do we ensure that an armed staff person makes the right decision about whether or not to use it? How do we ensure that the gun never falls into the hands of a student? I know how I handled this situation, but I can only imagine how much more difficult it would be for a teacher who knew that they were carrying a lethal weapon, and who had to balance teaching with constant vigilance against the risk that a student could find it and misuse it. I am grateful that I had the flexibility to remove my children from an environment that I could not be sure was safe; I know that other families in the district do not have this choice, and I grieve for them.

My experience with the school board's decision to arm teachers in Madison has brought me to the conclusion that local control is not enough. When school boards set their own standards for gun safety, inconsistent or ill-conceived policies impose real consequences and real costs on families like mine. They could, some day, end up costing a student his or her life. Policies designed without expert oversight, and without transparency and accountability, cannot give parents confidence that their children are safe if the teachers around them are carrying guns. I think it is a mistake to arm school staff who are not trained law enforcement. But if schools are going to do this anyway, lawmakers should ensure that there are clear, consistent guidelines for rigorous training—designed by experts, and not by special interest groups. And the law should make clear that parents have a right to know if there are armed teachers in their kids' school. Because HB 99 would allow armed staff with little training and no transparency, I oppose the bill.