

Testimony on House Bill 99
Senate Veterans and Public Safety Committee

Submitted by:
Lisa Voigt

Chair Hoagland, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to present this testimony in opposition to HB 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. I have had a troubled student in one of my courses at OSU who impulsively purchased a handgun and expressed to friends that he was afraid he might use it to shoot innocent people on campus. This experience—which I am haunted by whenever we hear of another school shooting, including the recent horror in Uvalde—forces me to consider any proposal that responds to such shootings seriously. As you should too, by considering the facts and not letting your emotional reaction and the agenda of the lobbyists dictate your legislative response.

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. 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. There were only three proponent testimonies on this bill—just one more than in the last session, although one of these (David Spicer’s oral testimony) did not offer support for the 8-hour training provision in the previous version, but instead quite clearly indicated that it was inadequate. I am glad that bill sponsors have acknowledged that more training is necessary by raising the requirement from 0 to 8 to 22 hours in the most recent version. But there has been no reason offered for capping at 22 hours the maximum that OPOTC can recommend (R.C. 109.73(A)(16) and (E) and 109.805(A), (C), and (D))—instead of, for example, the 152 hours previously recommended by then-Attorney General DeWine in 2014 (see Exhibit A of Doug Rogers’ testimony). Why are you afraid of what the OPOTC would recommend? Not one 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 SB 317, would 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. Again, I am glad that the HB 99 sponsors recognized the folly of *entirely* untrained individuals with loaded guns around children, as SB 317 would have allowed. But I'd like to point out what 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 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 ORC 109.78 training requirements 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.

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. Of course, after the shooting in Uvalde we know that a large contingent of highly trained police officers, who had been recently trained to respond to a mass shooting, can also fail to protect students from an 18-year-old with an AR15 and body armor. You cannot seriously surmise from this that teachers and staff with handguns and *less* training is the answer, or that the safety of all the students who will be subject to additional risks, when more firearms are in the hands of minimally trained individuals, should be sacrificed to the myth of a “good guy with a gun.” Just check the FBI statistics about how many civilians have stopped active shooters.¹ In the *only* case among the 10 total over the last 20 years where a civilian stopped a shooting at a school, it was an unarmed teacher who disarmed a student.² If the policies allowed by this bill were in place at that school—and that teacher had been armed without training in the lethal use of force, as this bill entirely fails to specify—that student would most certainly have been shot dead, and likely many others. To stop these tragedies, we must focus instead on prevention through raised minimum ages for firearm purchase, background checks on all gun sales, and Extreme Risk Protection Orders. That is what the evidence shows would help.³

¹ <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/active-shooter-incidents-20-year-review-2000-2019-060121.pdf/view> and <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/active-shooter-incidents-in-the-us-2021-052422.pdf/view>

²

<https://www.eastidahonews.com/2022/04/unsealed-documents-shed-new-light-on-what-happened-the-day-of-the-rigby-middle-school-shooting/>

³

https://everytownresearch.org/report/arming-teachers-introduces-new-risks-into-schools/?_gl=1*c2xfmn*_ga*_odq4mtixotkylje2ntm2odq3mdu.*_ga_lf0fwv3ek3*_mtty1mzc1otqxnc40ljaumty1mzc1otqxos4w

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 here in Ohio, 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