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## Bill Adding Parameters To Arming School Staff Advances Despite Law Enforcement Objections

A House panel on Wednesday reported legislation meant to improve school safety despite concerns from Democrats and law enforcement about arming school personnel.

The House Education Committee also adopted an amendment to the measure ([HB 8](#)) that would require the attorney general to establish a model curriculum for training an employee authorized to carry a firearm. The training would not be required to be used by schools.

Rep. John Patterson (D-Jefferson) failed to gain support for a change that would have allowed for the district safety decisions to be subject to collective bargaining. It was tabled on party lines. The bill was reported 14-4 with Rep. Heather Bischoff (D-Blacklick), [Rep. Debbie Phillips](#) (D-Athens) and Rep. Patterson joining Republicans in support.

[Rep. Teresa Fedor](#) (D-Toledo) said the legislature needs to go beyond "putting a band aid on" what schools are currently able to do. Funding for school resource officers should be included in the bill. She said the amendment's change to say districts "may" work with local law enforcement on developing policies should be returned to "shall."

[Rep. Fred Strahorn](#) (D-Dayton) said he appreciated the intent of the bill but he is concerned about granting qualified civil immunity to armed staff when the training provisions could be stronger.

The bill requires schools to collaborate with local law enforcement to develop safety protocol. It also requires those designated by the school board to carry a weapon in a school have a valid concealed carry license. Those permitted to carry in a school must also complete any additional firearms training required by the school protocol.

Existing law allows local school boards to designate a staff person to carry a weapon. John Gilchrist, legislative counsel for the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police, said his group opposes the bill because it seems to give tacit approval or sponsorship of the arming of staff. He acknowledged that schools are presently able to arm personnel.

He said if the bill passes, the 12-hour requirement for concealed carry training would be reduced to four hours. He said his group believes the CCW training coupled with additional training called for in the bill's amendment would still be inadequate.

School resource officers, however, have extensive training in operating a weapon. SCOs are police officers and receive regular training. Current law provides a very high standard for those who may go armed in the school.

[Rep. Andy Brenner](#) (R-Delaware) said the current statute leaves the arming of staff up to local schools without any regulation. The bill puts something in place in lieu of nothing. Mr. Gilchrist said providing immunity to those operating the weapon gives schools a false sense that the legislature wants them to arm staff.

Michael Weinman, director of governmental affairs for the Fraternal Order of Police, also said his organization opposes the bill because when armed, a teacher's primary responsibility is that of a first responder rather than an educator.

He said private, for-profit companies could approach school boards to provide firearms training. It would not compare, however, to the training received by law enforcement.

Sponsoring [Rep. Kristina Roegner](#) (R-Hudson) asked what schools located many minutes from law enforcement should do in the event of a shooting. Mr. Weinman said the FOP has been fighting for more resource officers in schools. He referenced a recently enacted law that allows schools to seek levies to cover the cost of school resource officers.

"As a parent, I don't want to see security on the cheap," he said.

Renuka Mayadev, executive director of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio, said she also opposes the bill, saying there is no evidence that visible or concealed weapons carried in schools prevent acts of violence. An armed officer was present at the Columbine High School shooting.

Rep. Strahorn said he was going back and forth on a provision to keep the identity of those armed staff confidential and as something decided in an executive session of the school board. He asked witnesses their thoughts.

William Nye Jr., superintendent of Grand Valley Local Schools, said he thinks that for a shooter to know someone in the school has a weapon is a deterrent. He wants to see that personnel member's identity private because it could disrupt the educational process.

John Rubesich, superintendent of Ashtabula County Educational Service Center, said he would prefer to not even let his board members be aware of who was armed, preferring to make the selection himself. He said he does not know that there are any teachers in the two districts he formerly oversaw that he would want to arm and very few administrators.

**Other Testimony:** Mr. Nye said he and neighboring superintendents started to study school defense after the attorney general's office indicated that arming school personnel was a local decision.

He said that is an appealing option for rural schools where law enforcement response times are lengthy. Three schools near Grand Valley have established a program to arm personnel. A group of superintendents is studying the concept as well.

Mr. Nye said, however, he feels there should be a specialized training and certification endorsed by the AG's office for armed personnel. He said among his concerns with the bill are:

- The need to work with and be trained by local law enforcement so those agencies know who has the credentials.
- There should be a skill requirement with the specific firearm with an annual re-qualification.
- The need for a psychological component to the credentialing process dealing with the use of deadly force.
- The need for a provision to allow those who are carrying a firearm to be able to move from "school zone to school zone" as administrators often do.
- That the training be similar in part to the training at the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy.

Answering Rep. Patterson, the witness said he thinks the psychological component of the credentialing should be done annually.

[Rep. Denise Driehaus](#) (D-Cincinnati) asked if the witness is concerned about how the weapon is stored. Mr. Nye said another district he knows of requires the weapon always be on the person. Another discussion has been on putting the gun in a box with a biometric fingerprint lock.

Rep. Fedor asked if the superintendent would be willing to ask voters for a levy to support a school resource officer in his district, as allowed by law. Mr. Nye said he would be willing to do that but his resources are limited and he has a need for funding for technology.

John Rubesich, superintendent of Ashtabula County Educational Service Center, said school personnel are the true first responders when a shooting happens in a building. Often by the time first responders arrive at an incident the event is over.

He said he supports an amendment to require the AG's office to develop a baseline training requirement.

Answering Rep. Strahorn, Mr. Rubesich said the training his staff has engaged in for active shooter situations was beneficial but he would like to have more.

Sgt. Scott Wagner, of Baltimore, said immediately following the Sandy Hook shooting he volunteered at the Liberty Union Elementary and Middle School in Baltimore where he positioned himself in a cruiser on the lots, stayed visible and equipped to deal with any copycat threat that might arise between the time of the shooting and Christmas break.

"The people who commit these acts are cowards," he said. "When faced with the threat of capture by law enforcement or armed citizen, they immediately either give up or take their own lives. Their sociopathic personality allows them to commit unspeakable violence against unarmed children and staff, but prevents them from continuing when faced by someone who is armed, and it does not always have to be a cop."

Sgt. Wagner said schools do not have enough money to pay the number of law enforcement officers it would take to protect the perimeters of schools. The only thing that can work to stop shootings is armed school staff and the plan in HB8.

"I believe that school employees who have a valid concealed carry permit, and who volunteer to take part, must have the right to protect our children," he said.

Michelle Francis, deputy director of legislative services for the Ohio School Boards Association, said the group does not have a position on arming personnel or the possession of firearms on school grounds, but believes each district should be able to decide the issue based on what best represents their needs.

OSBA Director of Legislative Services Damon Asbury said the group otherwise supports the basic components of the bill because it preserves the right of local boards to allow individuals to carry weapons. It also establishes appropriate parameters for that authority.

He said OSBA appreciates language providing liability protections for boards, but believes there should be training beyond that required for the concealed handgun license.

Mr. Asbury said OSBA wants any off-duty peace officers to notify the school administrator when he or she is in the school zone and is carrying a concealed weapon.

He told Rep. Driehaus he would prefer to have more resource officers in schools but funding has been an issue. There are fewer such officers in schools now than a few years ago because of financial issues.

Rep. Fedor said she thinks the decision to arm an employee is a change in working conditions and therefore should be subject to collective bargaining. Mr. Asbury said school safety issues are not subject to that but teachers and staff are required to be included in discussions in creating the school safety plan.