

Arming Teachers as a Response to School Shootings

March 13, 2018 (IN10870)

Nathan James, Analyst in Crime Policy (njames@crs.loc.gov, 7-0264)

In the wake of the February 14, 2018, shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, President Trump endorsed a proposal to [arm teachers as a way to potentially thwart school shootings](#). The President's endorsement has generated debate about whether this policy option would make schools safer.

Proponents argue that arming educators provides a deterrent effect and that armed teachers could respond to an active shooter quicker than police. Opponents argue that teachers do not want the responsibility of countering active shooters; they raise questions about whether teachers can receive enough training to make them effective in an active shooter situation; and they argue that allowing firearms on school grounds could create other problems, such as police mistaking armed school personnel for assailants.

A Lack of Rigorous Evidence Regarding Effectiveness

There is no sound research on whether arming teachers prevents school shootings. The theory underlying arming teachers is similar to that of placing school resource officers (SROs) in schools: their presence could have a deterrent effect and they could react quicker than the police to active shooters. However, [one review of the literature on SROs and armed guards](#) finds mixed results regarding their effect on school crime, and no research has evaluated their effect on mass shootings. The review noted anecdotal evidence that mass shooters were not deterred by the presence of law enforcement officers during shootings at [Columbine High School](#) and [Virginia Tech](#).

Limited evidence exists to indicate whether armed teachers could end active shooting incidents. In a few instances, private citizens carrying firearms have halted active shooters. [The Federal Bureau of Investigation released a report on active shooter incidents from 2000 to 2013](#). Of the 160 active shooter incidents both inside and outside of academic settings that the study identified, five (3%) ended when armed private citizens exchanged gunfire with shooters. Most incidents concluded after police and shooters exchanged gunfire (28%), when shooters committed suicide before the police arrived (23%), unarmed citizens subdued shooters (13%), or shooters committed suicide after police arrived but before they could act (11%).

Issues: Limits on Carrying Firearms on School Grounds and Costs

Policymakers might consider several issues if they take up legislation to arm teachers. One is whether teachers would be allowed to possess firearms on school grounds. [The Gun-Free School Zones Act](#) generally prohibits individuals from knowingly possessing firearms on school grounds. However, this does not apply if someone is [licensed by a state or locality to possess a firearm](#). A patchwork of state laws addresses who can possess a firearm on school property. [The National Conference of State Legislatures \(NCSL\) reports](#) that 19 states allow anyone with permission from a school authority to possess a firearm on school grounds. Another five states allow anyone with a [concealed carry permit](#) to possess a firearm on school grounds. New Hampshire allows anyone, except for students in certain circumstances, to possess a firearm on school grounds. Missouri allows people with a concealed carry license to have a firearm on school grounds if approved by the school authority, Wyoming allows school staff to carry a firearm if they have permission from the school authority.

Another issue policymakers might consider is whether the federal government would cover the cost of purchasing firearms for teachers and providing training on active shooter situations. Doing so might require a sizable investment on the part of Congress. [An analysis in the Washington Post](#) estimates that it would cost anywhere from \$250 million to \$1 billion to arm one-fifth of all teachers ([President Trump clarified that he thought 20% of the most adept teachers should be armed](#)). Total expenditures would depend on the cost of firearms and whether training on active shooter scenarios is covered.

Select Policy Options

Currently, the Department of Justice does not have a grant program that specifically [provides funds for purchasing firearms for teachers](#). States can make subawards to schools from funds they receive under the [Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant \(JAG\) program](#), but subawards must be for projects that fall within one of JAG's program purpose areas. It is not clear whether arming and training teachers would be consistent with JAG's purpose areas. [Community Oriented Policing Services \(COPS\)](#) grants can be used for active shooter training, but it is not clear whether grants could be awarded to train teachers. Grants under the [Secure Our Schools \(SOS\) program](#), which had its authorization lapse at the end FY2009 and has not been funded since FY2011, can be used for school security measures. The authorization does not specifically provide for purchasing firearms or training school personnel on their use, but it does allow grants to be awarded for measures that significantly improve school security, as determined by the Director of the COPS Office. Congress could amend the authorization for the JAG, COPS, or SOS programs so funds could be used to purchase firearms and provide training for teachers. If funds could be used to arm and train educators, policymakers might consider whether applicants would be required to meet certain metrics (e.g., a certain proportion of the faculty agreeing to be armed and trained).

Congress could authorize a new grant program to provide funding for arming and training teachers. If Congress were to do this, policymakers might consider the following questions:

- What costs would the program cover (e.g., purchasing firearms, training, increased pay, or [insurance policies](#))?
- If teachers are armed, should they be required to engage in regular tactical training exercises and target practice? Should schools be required to send teachers to a national or regional training service provider?
- Should there be a requirement for firearms on school grounds to be stored securely?
- Who should administer the program—the Department of Justice, the Department of Education?

Finally, if teachers are asked to respond to active shooters, Congress might consider whether to expand the authorization under the [Matching Grant Program for Armor Vests](#) so that school districts could apply for funding to help offset the cost of purchasing armor vests for teachers.

