

Safety in Rural Schools: Teachers as Security Guards

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Abstract

Safety for teachers and students is an issue that stays close to administrators' minds always as the doors of schools are opened each day. There are many advantages and disadvantages to having teachers act as security guards for a school district. This article looks at a few of these issues to assist superintendents in the decision process.

As some school districts, school boards, and superintendents are deciding if their school staff will be able to bring concealed weapons to school, other states are experiencing unexpected ramifications of their decisions. In Arkansas, districts can allow teachers to bring concealed weapons. Many rural and small school districts have made this decision as they want to provide a safe and secure environment, but the expense of a school resource officer or security guard is too expensive (Lott, 2013).

In Kansas, South Dakota, and Tennessee, teachers can bring a concealed weapon to schools, but the cost has been great. July 2013, the Kansas school districts received notice from their insurance carrier. EMC Insurance Companies; which provides approximately 90 percent of Kansas school districts insurance, has declared that schools who allow employees to carry concealed handguns would not receive coverage from their company (Yaccino, 2013).

In Indiana, a very similar situation occurred. The district was very concerned about the financial cost of allowing staff to carry guns. The first hurdle of the training cost was superseded as the local sheriff offered to provide the training. The next hurdle of purchasing the guns was eliminated when a local community member donated \$27,000 worth of guns to the school district (Yaccino, 2013). The plan could not be carried out due to workers' compensation being denied if the schools allowed teachers to be armed.

Teachers as Security Guards

The Associated Press of the NY Daily times recently reported, “Clarksville district trains 20 teachers and staffers as gun-packing security guards.’Nighthawk’ training aims to prevent Sandy Hook-style shootings” (2013, p.1). This article and many similar articles around our country are being published because of the new “trend” that allows teachers to become “security guards” to protect their students and themselves. This particular district in Clarksville, Arkansas, is giving teachers a stipend of \$1100 to purchase a handgun and holster. “The district has also purchased \$50,000 in ammunition and for training by the Nighthawk Training Academy” in northwest Arkansas (Associated Press, 2013, p. 3). Districts have gone from purchasing computers and books to bullets and masks. One may ask, “Is this going too far?” or “Is this far enough?” There are mixed reactions among local educators, students and the community on the issue of armed school personnel on school campuses.

Schools in Arkansas are locking doors, discussing fences with razor wire around schools, placing shatter proof glass in place of the glass that was installed years ago, having a resource officer for every campus and having many other discussions to keep students safe in our school environments. These are conversations that would never have taken place several years ago. Educators did not become educators to think about safety and security for themselves and for students. Many of them became educators because of their love for learning. Every day these same educators go to school with a little apprehension about their own personal safety because we all know the shooter will be someone we know, not a stranger. Even at Sandy Hook if the young man had buzzed to be let into the building, the secretary would have allowed him entry due to the fact she knew him. Keeping the shooter out would be so much easier if it was a stranger. There are so many variables to consider when leaders are faced with the tough decisions.

In rural schools, such as those in Arkansas, there are so many unique situations that rural school superintendents must face. One thing to consider is that many of the districts have been around for decades and when the buildings were built apart from one another, this particular safety situation was not a consideration. In the small rural districts, many agriculture buildings are away from the main campus. This is a perfect situation for a shooter and a hostage situation. Also, gymnasiums were built away from the main building for educational reasons. Now these buildings could be prime targets for violence. Another issue is all of the glass that is very attractive and it does allow the sunlight in the buildings. This glass makes students an easy target for a shooter in the building or outside the building. Another safety issue with these old buildings is how the classroom doors lock from the outside. These doors were meant to be locked when the teacher left for the day, not to keep the students in the room and the shooter out of the room. As we have learned, seconds are precious when a shooter is in the building and the teacher does not have the luxury of time to go out and lock a door. There are so many obstacles with our older buildings to overcome for the safety of our students.

Advantages of Teachers as Security Guards

One action being discussed in several school districts is “arming” the faculty. Supporters of armed faculty are concerned about the critical minutes between the time a determined shooter bursts into a school and the time that trained law enforcement personnel can

arrive (Singer, 2012). It is a very short span of time when a gunman walks into the school and the police actually arrive. Many lives are already lost during these heart drenching moments. Arming school personnel and giving them the proper training could make a difference in shootings that are already in progress.

Another advantage of allowing teachers to be armed and trained would be a line of defense and protection for the students (Rickman, 2013). The first concern is children's safety. Many teachers have lost their lives in protecting their children. The outcome may have been different if the teacher was armed. It would put some parents' minds at ease knowing their children aren't defenseless at school.

According to Lecher (2012), there was a 2009 University of Pennsylvania study on the chances of being shot when holding a gun versus not holding a gun. By comparing those who were shot and armed with a gun and those who were not, the researchers found a correlation. The researchers found that someone in possession of a gun was about 4.5 times more likely to be shot than someone who did not have a gun which was 5.5 times more likely to be shot. While this is not a big margin numerically, it is when it comes to saving one life.

Gunmen who know that there is an "armed" faculty in a school may not want to enter the building. They are aware there is a chance they can be killed in a matter of seconds. The media is letting the public know where teachers are being trained to carry firearms. This environment may be less desirable for a gunman.

Disadvantages of Teachers as Security Guards

There are also disadvantages for allowing faculty to carry guns in schools. If the gun is totally locked up, how quickly could a teacher get it? According to Singer (2012), would it make a difference if a teacher is wearing a gun unless she is willing to use it? Teachers are already responsible for locking their purses, cleaners, and medicine. A gun would be locked up in this same manner. In a matter of seconds when a gunman is entering the building, it may be difficult to get to a locked gun.

Patricia Frost Brooks, with the Ohio Education Association, says teachers shouldn't be forced into being an educator and a security guard. "We aren't going to be there to be armed and carry a weapon and then be the academic leaders and do the teaching and preparing students for the 21st century skills" (Kasler, 2013, p. 2). Teachers are already considered as nurses, psychologists, mamas, and daddies. Now security guard will be added as an extra role in the six-eight hour day. Academics should still be considered as the number one priority for teachers.

Students get their hands on guns, and they know how to use them. FBI homicide data indicate that of the 1,448 children who died as a result of gun violence in 2010, 165 of those deaths were at the hands of other children (Corbett, 2013). This would be devastating to a teacher, a school, a district, and to the community. No one wants to live with the memory of a child dying to a gunshot that was fired from a gun located in their own classroom.

Ashley Lauren Samsa states,

We don't need more guns in schools. We need more empathy and compassion. We need to make dealing with mental health and keeping guns out of the hands of would-be criminals our main priorities in order to prevent these tragedies in the first place. (2013, p. 2)

This is where crime prevention takes charge of our community needs. Many times, people who act out in a crime rage show some kind of negative behavioral signs before the incident. Parents, teachers, church leaders, and community neighbors should listen more to the cries of help that are coming from the people who surround them.

It was noted earlier that a school in Clarkesville, Arkansas received training for faculty members to carry firearms in their district. It was later recorded in the media that a regulatory panel blocked the schools in Clarksville from arming teachers and staff as volunteer security guards. The reversal came after Arkansas Attorney General Dustin McDaniel “said in a legal opinion that the board was wrong to issue licenses to school districts designating them as private security firms so they could arm teachers and staff” (Hartogs, 2013, p. 2).

Additional school resource officers on school campuses to assist with school safety are a necessity in today’s society. Reserve officers that have participated in the Sheriff’s classes of approximately 110 hours of coursework should be armed and ready to protect the faculty, staff and students. Schools should also have in place safe routes to exit the school in the case of an emergency. This safe route should be practiced on a regular basis. School shooting scenarios are becoming mandatory for schools to participate in so everyone will be prepared. Designated personnel should have certain responsibilities in regard to calling law enforcements, contacting parents, and assisting students. Every school should have a crisis plan ready and be prepared.

Mandatory Training for School Safety

Superintendents in rural schools, with school board support, have to make the tough decision before a shooting incident occurs in their district. One district in Arkansas, Cedar Ridge, has chosen to have selected faculty members trained to be Reserve Officers with the local police department and pay them a \$3000 stipend annually to carry a gun at school and to employ a full time Resource Officer to be on campus. One of these Reserve Officers is a band director and the other one is an agriculture teacher. The band director has been a Reserve Officer for a neighboring town, Newport, for several years and the agriculture teacher wanted the opportunity because his building is away from the high school and he and his students are outside many days taking care of the animals since this school has a very active show team. These two individuals had to have over 100 hours in training, and they are required to work with the Independence County Sheriff’s Office for a training session for at least three hours during each month to remain certified (Cedar Ridge School Board, 2013).

The 2014-15 school year will be the first year the legislators in Arkansas mandate a shooting drill for all faculty and staff according to Senator Irvin who drafted Senate Bill 140. It states,

AN ACT TO ESTABLISH THE SAFE SCHOOL INITIATIVE ACT TO PROMOTE PUBLIC SCHOOL CAMPUS SAFETY; TO REQUIRE PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO PARTICIPATE IN ACTIVE SHOOTER DRILLS AND PROVIDE EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR EMPLOYEES TO PREPARE FOR INCIDENTS OF CAMPUS VIOLENCE; AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES. (S. Rep. No. 140-89, 2013)

The training, for the Cedar Ridge School District with the two Reserve Officers that are teachers in the high school, will take place before school begins during a professional development day. The agenda for that day will be a speaker. It will be the principal that was at the Westside shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas in 1998 where four students and one teacher were killed and nine students and one teacher were wounded. He will begin the day with her personal experience as a principal of what really happened the day Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson pulled the fire alarm and faculty, staff, and students went outside for a routine fire drill. Then, a police officer that has been trained will speak and train the faculty and staff for the shooting drill. The drill will actually take place at the high school. After the drill, the faculty and staff will have a debriefing and a reflection time with questions (Cedar Ridge School Board, 2013).

For this small school of approximately 825 students, this will be a professional development experience that will not resemble any of the past professional days. Many Arkansas school districts will be planning to experience this educational endeavor this fall or during the 2014-15 school year as it is mandated in Arkansas. So the question remains, "Should teachers be allowed to carry weapons at school?" The answer will have to be defined by the Superintendent and the local School Board as they continue to listen to the stakeholders and research for the answer that best fits their community.

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